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DAN ROSS

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THIS MAGIC SCALPEL

**By
DAN ROSS**



CHAPTER ONE

THE small, white-walled office was as formal and cold as the prim, pince-nezzed woman wearing the uniform and cap of a supervising nurse who sat behind the desk that was its main furnishing. Amelia Blair plainly showed her annoyance as she regarded Irene with hard eyes.

"So you've really decided to leave us?" she asked.

Irene Hall nodded. "Yes. I've definitely made up my mind."

The head nurse sighed and glanced down at some papers she had laid out before her on the desk. She spoke in a lower tone as if to herself. "I must say all you girls are the same. Manhattan General gives you your training and then you can't run off quickly enough."

Irene felt a sudden flush come to her cheeks. She stood in quiet defiance, knowing that the quick-tempered head nurse was never at her best in the late afternoons. But it had seemed to be the first opportunity she'd had all day to take the matter up with her.

"I'm actually sorry to be leaving," Irene said quietly. "But this is a personal matter."

Amelia Blair raised her eyes again and this time regarded her with some curiosity. "Perhaps I can be of help. If there's anything I can do I'll be glad to take a personal interest. You know how short we are of nurses."

"I know," Irene agreed. "And I'm sorry. But there's nothing you can do. I'm planning to leave New York and work in a smaller city."

Irene was polite but definite in her manner.

She was a slim, good-looking blonde type whose large, solemn blue eyes gave her an intelligent, alert expression. Just now she faced the head nurse with a glint of cool assurance in them. It was three years since she'd graduated as a Manhattan General student nurse and she'd gained a lot of experience working in the hospital in that time.

Head Nurse Blair stared at her. "Of course I have no intention of prying into your affairs," she said crisply. "But it does seem you've changed your mind

rather suddenly. Are you going back to the mid-West? That's your home area, isn't it?"

Irene smiled. "Yes. But I'm not going home. I'm going to work in a hospital in a small town in Connecticut. Dr. Ralph Grant has offered me a position at the Stockton Memorial Hospital and I've accepted."

The prim woman at the desk reacted to this exactly as she'd expected. A startled expression crossed the face of the head nurse. "Really?" she said. "I didn't know where Dr. Grant had gone after he left his uncle." And then with a special emphasis she continued, "Or if he had stayed in practice at all!"

"He's with Dr. Franz Lederer," Irene said. "They are using a wing of the Stockton Memorial for their work. They want me to come as operating nurse and also to special certain cases."

"Lederer is one of the most respected names in plastic surgery in this country," Amelia Blair agreed grudgingly. "But I thought he was in retirement. I know his health has been very poor."

"It seems he's still active," Irene said.

The head nurse smiled rather sarcastically. "Well, they will be most fortunate in getting you. You've had a great deal of operating room experience in plastic surgery cases with the older Dr. Grant."

"It has been a wonderful experience for me," Irene acknowledged. "Dr. Cabell Grant has taught me a great deal." She said this with sincerity as Ralph's uncle was a top man in his field and she'd gained a lot from working for him at the hospital.

"When will you be leaving?" Amelia Blair asked.

"As soon as possible," Irene said.

The head nurse looked down at her desk with a sigh. "I must have at least a fortnight's notice."

Irene had hoped she might let her go right away. But she might have known that she wouldn't. She hesitated a moment and then said: "If you feel you need me that badly then I suppose it will have to be a fortnight."

"Very well," the head nurse said. "If you change your mind let me know."

We'd like to have you reconsider staying with us."

"Thank you," Irene smiled. "I don't think there's any chance of that."

With that Irene left the room as quickly as she could. It had been a tiring day and she'd dreaded this interview. Now that it was over with she felt suddenly exhausted. She was anxious to get home to her small apartment a few blocks away and have a quick, cooling shower. The late summer New York heat was something she'd never got used to, and she looked forward to leaving the city for the small town in Connecticut and her new job.

As Irene hurried along the corridor she came face to face with a stout, black-haired girl with a pleasant smile. It was Lona Mason, one of the nurses who'd been in training with her.

Lona said: "Did you finally get in to see Blair?"

Irene nodded. "I've just been in there. I've told her I'm to go in a fortnight."

The dark girl laughed. "I'll bet it put her in a good mood."

"Just what you might expect," Irene said ruefully.

"I expected that," Lona said. "Anyway it will go fast. Give you time to let the others around here get used to the idea."

Irene's smile held meaning. "It will be quite a shock to a few."

"Especially Max," Lona said. "He was enquiring for you at the desk a few minutes ago. I thought you'd gone home, and told him you had."

"That's all right," Irene said. "He's coming to my place for dinner anyhow. Plenty of time to break the news to him, then."

Lona's eyes danced with mischief. "I'd like to be hidden in a corner when you tell him."

"It's going to be quite a shock to Dr. Max Marshall," Irene said. "And not too pleasant for me. Suppose we change places. You tell him."

Lona shook her head. "I'm glad it's your job. How did Head Nurse Blair react to the news that you're going to work for Ralph Grant?"

"She almost choked," she said. "Ralph's name is a nasty word here now."

"I know," Lona agreed. "And I think it's just terrible. His uncle has been terribly unfair to him."

Irene's pleasant young face clouded. "It's not a very fair world anyway," she said. "Otherwise I wouldn't have to be doing what I am."

Lona touched her arm with understanding. "That's so true. But in the end I think you'll feel you've been lucky."

"I wonder," Irene managed a smile. "I'll know soon enough."

With that the two friends parted and Irene hurried on to change her clothes. A short time later she took the elevator down to the main floor of Manhattan General and made her way through its busy lobby to the street.

The hospital was one of the smaller privately operated institutions in the great city and was located on the Avenue of the Americas within sight of Central Park. Although it had an excellent medical staff it was not actually a general hospital as its name suggested. Its cases were all medical or surgical patients of the various staff doctors and it offered no emergency ambulance service nor any out-patient ward.

Manhattan General had won a reputation for two specialties. It was known to have some of the best chest surgeons in the country on its staff and it also had a plastic surgery clinic that had won international fame. It had been Irene's good luck to have worked in this field almost from the time of her graduation. She had found it fascinating.

Dr. Cabell Grant, the head of the department, was a big bluff man with a great deal of personal charm. Until a year ago his chief assistant had been his nephew, Dr. Ralph Grant. The younger man was a thin, reticent type in contrast to his more expansive uncle. But he had shown the same talent for plastic surgery and the older doctor had been enthusiastic in his predictions for his future.

Since they did the major amount of the work in the field Irene had served as operating nurse for them many times. She had come to be very fond of them both. And she was as shocked as the rest of the hospital staff when the scandal broke that sent Ralph from the hospital under a cloud.

It had happened suddenly. A young woman patient, attractive but definitely neurotic, had come in for the removal of a birthmark on her cheek. It was a large blueish patch and had required an operation in two stages. When she came in a second time for the final operation Irene heard some rumours that the girl was infatuated with Ralph Grant.

Apparently the young doctor had made the mistake of seeing her socially a few times between the operations. Irene felt that he'd probably been sorry

for the girl but the neurotic young woman had taken his attentions as a sign of love. The situation became so embarrassing for the young plastic surgeon that he had told her frankly she was mistaken.

The night before she was to leave the hospital the girl took an overdose of sleeping tablets that she'd somehow smuggled in with her. She left a note filled with hysterical, pathetic references to her love for Ralph Grant and directly accused him of leading her on.

Fortunately she recovered. But the story went around the hospital. Even then no one took the situation seriously. However, the older Dr. Grant did. He surprised everyone by turning vindictively on his nephew and accusing him of a breach of professional etiquette. The difference between them led to the younger man resigning from the Manhattan General staff.

Irene had been sorry to see him go as they had been good friends. In fact she'd gone out with him several times. She found it impossible to reconcile the older doctor's attitude towards his nephew with what she knew about him.

She remembered the morning when Dr. Ralph had not made an appearance at the hospital to routinely check his patients. She had gone to the older doctor in his office to enquire why.

The big man had been in an ugly mood. "I will attend to all the patients myself," he'd told her with a frown. "My nephew has severed his connections with the hospital and my practice."

In contrast to his former attitude towards Ralph the older specialist now let it be known that he was angry and disgusted with him. For days after his nephew left he stalked through the hospital corridors with his distress written plainly on his bored face.

More than once Irene heard him tell some associate: "I will have nothing to do with that young man from now on. He's not to be trusted."

Irene had been startled but not impressed by his performance.

Irene felt, as many others of the hospital staff did, that Dr. Cabell Grant had been much too harsh and quite unfair to the young man. And so she had not hesitated to accept his written invitation to join his staff in the Stockton Memorial Hospital. The offer had miraculously come at a moment when it was most welcome.

She'd received it in the mail two days ago just a few hours after she'd received

that other letter that had changed everything for her. The letter about Max!

Dr. Max Marshall had come to Manhattan General from the West Coast. He was a handsome, redheaded young man with a slightly crooked smile that added to his charm. He'd studied under a leading chest surgeon and this was to be his speciality at Manhattan General. He arrived just ten days after Ralph Grant left and she soon became friends with him.

In the months that followed they'd spent a lot of their leisure time in each other's company. In fact it was taken for granted around the hospital that she and Max were going together. He certainly had eyes for none of the other nurses. Irene began to feel that this might be the real thing.

She and Lona had talked it over one evening while having dinner at the restaurant in the Manger Windsor hotel which was just across the street from the hospital.

Lona studied her with concerned eyes. "This has all happened pretty suddenly hasn't it?"

"I know," Irene smiled. "But that doesn't worry me. It actually seems as if we've known each other all our lives."

"He's a charmer all right," Lona agreed. "But just what do you know about him?"

She shrugged. "He has a mother and father in San Francisco. He's an only son. They didn't have much money but they managed to help him through medical school. He did so well that they suggested him for the hospital here. What else is there to know?"

"What about girl friends?" Lona asked. "He must have had some. Doesn't he ever speak of them?"

Irene hesitated. "I don't think Max has had much time for romance. The only girl I've ever heard him talk about was one he dated in high school. The last time he met her she was married with twins."

"Well, I guess it's all as good as it sounds," her friend said reluctantly with a note of doubt still in her voice. "But he's so neat with that bedside manner of his I'm just naturally suspicious of him."

At the time Irene had laughed the dark-haired girl's doubts away. But now she knew how right she had been. Now when it was too late! When she had no choice but to leave the hospital or stay there and be humiliated.

As she walked along the two busy blocks in the warm afternoon sun these thoughts raced through her mind. She was upset and confused. Tonight was not going to be easy. She hoped that when she faced Max she would be able to tell him her feelings in the right words.

At last she came to the tall new apartment building in which she had a tiny one room apartment. The rent was higher than she could really afford but the place was new and clean and she enjoyed having her own small kitchenette. She liked good food and cooking was a favourite hobby.

Max had soon discovered that, she thought, as she pushed the button for the tenth floor in the shining self-service elevator. She remembered the dozens of times he'd come to her apartment for dinner just as he was coming tonight. Until now she'd not thought much about it. But Max had never once suggested she might be too tired to cook for them and insisted that they go out to a restaurant. There had been lots of small warnings that she hadn't paid any attention to.

She knew that he'd only recently set up practice in the city and that he tried to send some money back home each week. His father was retired and a semi-invalid without a pension. Making allowances for these things she hadn't expected him to spend much money on her. And he hadn't!

They'd gone to see foreign movies a couple of times and once they'd taken in a concert at the Lincoln Centre, but generally speaking Max left the entertaining to her. Except for the dinner at her apartment and the occasional parties given by some of their friends at the hospital they'd done very little.

Irene unlocked the apartment door and let herself in. It was a bright room with pastel walls and woodwork in a light cream shade. She had bought a few reproductions of gay prints and hung them about the place. The living room furniture was modern and still not completely paid for, she thought wryly. It was lucky that Lona had been anxious to find an apartment and was willing to take this over along with the furniture or she'd have had these extra problems to plague her.

Quickly she slipped off her clothing and took the shower she'd anticipated for most of the afternoon. Feeling much better she put on a gay print summer robe and went to work in the cubicle of

a kitchen. Max was fond of steak and she had a couple frozen in the freezer.

By the time it was seven o'clock and Max was due she had the dinner under way and the table set. She'd also fixed her hair, which she wore in a close to the head simple cut, and put on a pale blue dress with a round neckline. She paused before the mirror to slip on a single strand pearl necklace and judge her appearance for the task ahead.

She looked suitably chic and calm, she decided. If she could just keep herself under control until she'd told him. She didn't want him to notice first that she was nervous. The bell rang and she turned with a small start and a rueful smile that was an admission of her jumpy state.

When she opened the door Max came in with his usual bounce and assurance. He was wearing a lightweight fawn suit and looked sleek and well-groomed as always.

"What a day!" he complained, and taking her by the arms gave her a dutiful kiss on the lips. "I've been waiting all afternoon for that," he said with a smile.

"I'll bet you have," she said with a teasing cynicism.

He put an arm around her and they walked across the room together. "Honestly," he said, "you're the bright spot in my life. If it weren't for you I'd take the first available jet back to the West Coast."

"Sit down," she said. "The steak is waiting and I don't want it to be ruined." "Heaven forbid!" Max exclaimed. "That I couldn't stand."

He sat at the table and she prepared his plate. He called to her: "How were things with you?"

"Average," she said, determined not to show her feelings yet. "I had a talk with Amelia Blair that wasn't much fun."

"The prim Amelia!" The redheaded young doctor laughed. "She takes herself pretty seriously, doesn't she? What did you have your row about? Who was going to have vacations this month? I hear she's been changing the schedule."

"Nothing like that," she said, joining him at the table. "I'll tell you about it later."

The steaks were good and Max seemed hungrier than usual. The young man with the red hair finally sat back with a cigarette to enjoy his coffee. His face wore a happy smile. "Another great dinner, Irene," he said. "You were born to be a cook."

Her blue eyes mocked him across the table. "I suppose that's meant to be a compliment even if it is a clumsy one."

"You bet it is." He leaned forward and placed a hand on hers. "I could have added the loveliest cook in my muddled world. But that you can take for granted."

"I've been taking quite a lot for granted," she said, her eyes dropping to her cup as she slowly stirred her coffee.

He sat up straight with a curious glance at her. "It seems to me I note a certain air of mystery about you tonight."

She looked at him again with the same mocking smile. "Not really! You know I'm just the plain Jane type who likes to cook and all."

"Now I'm certain there's something in the air," he said. "What is it?"

"Well," she hesitated for effect before saying it, "for one thing I'm leaving the hospital in a fortnight."

It seemed to take the breath out of him. His pleasant, even features took on an unbelieving look. "Leaving the hospital?"

"That's right."

"What are you talking about?" he demanded. He got up and came around to stand by her. "What about us? Whatever put such a thing into your head?"

She looked up at him coolly. "The idea came to me rather quickly. I have a job in another hospital waiting for me and I'm going to take it."

"Well, this is a surprise," he said. "I suppose you've got a better offer somewhere else in town. I can't say that I blame you. Amelia Blair is a dragon and some of the doctors at Manhattan aren't easy to work with."

"I'm not staying in town," she said. "I'm going to Connecticut."

There was a moment of astonished silence between them. Then Max frowned at her and said: "I think you'd better explain yourself, Irene. Or are you just telling me we're finished?"

She found herself near tears. So much was being lost in this minute or rather had been lost to bring this situation about. The deep hurt that she'd kept submerged in her for the last three days now came to the surface with a frightening intensity.

Up until now she'd managed to control herself with hasty plans for a new future. A resolve that she wouldn't let this thing hurt her too much. But now, at the moment of revelation, she knew that she'd been hoping for the impossible. She was hurt—deeply hurt!

Fighting back the tears that momentarily threatened to betray her she got up from the table and went across to the sideboard and opening a drawer took out a long legal size envelope.

"I think this will explain things better than anything I can say," she told him. And she came over and handed him the letter. She could tell by the sudden flush in his cheeks and the expression of guilt that clouded his face that he already guessed what the envelope contained.

He glanced at her sheepishly as he took it. "You're making quite a drama of this," he said.

She didn't answer him right away but stood in silence as he drew the single typed sheet from the envelope and read it. His eyes were still on the paper when she broke the silence by saying: "Now you know."

He sighed and folded the letter and handed it back to her. When he spoke his voice was heavy with resignation. "I might have known something like this would happen."

Now her eyes flooded with tears and she had difficulty controlling her voice as she said: "Naturally you would. But I didn't guess! Didn't guess that you had a wife on the West Coast. A wife wealthy enough and interested enough to have a private detective spy on us and write me this letter of warning."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Irene," he said. "I didn't intend that you should find out this way."

"Did you think I'd find out at all?" She shot the question at him.

"Please," he took a step towards her, "at least give me a chance to tell you my side of it."

She turned away from him and touched her hankie to her eyes. And then with a shrug she moved across to the small divan and sat down. "I've found out all I really need know," she said, and added with irony, "And from an official source."

Max followed her to the divan and sat beside her. "I intended to tell you about myself," he said. "I've asked Helen for a divorce. I tried to get her to give me one before we parted on the coast. She's been putting me off. I had no idea she'd do a thing like this."

"In the meantime," Irene said, "you've placed us both in an impossible position at the hospital."

"I don't see that this makes any difference," Max insisted. "I feel exactly the way I always have about you. As

soon as I get my divorce I want to marry you."

Irene gave him a bitter smile. "If you read the letter carefully you'll see that your wife says there will be no divorce under any circumstances."

"She's only doing that because she's found out about you," Max said. "I know eventually she'll agree. She doesn't love me, never did. She married me because she thought I was some sort of puppet she could buy and control. When she found that wasn't possible the novelty wore off."

She looked away. "If you'd at least been honest with me from the first there might have been some chance for us. As things are now I think the sooner we stop seeing each other the better. That's why I'm leaving the hospital."

His hand touched her arm and he spoke to her earnestly, "Look, darling, I've never known a single moment's happiness until we met. This marriage of mine was a calamity from the beginning. I intended to tell you the whole sorry story as soon as I had word from Helen."

She glanced at him. "Well, now we've had the word," she said quietly. "I'm sorry. I just wish you'd go, Max. I have a nasty headache."

He stared at her in frustration and anger. Then after a moment he got up. "All right," he said. "I'll go if that's what you want."

"It's over, Max," she said, still in the quiet tone. "Let's accept that as decently as we can. I'm not going to hate you or try to blame you. I just don't want to have anything more to do with you."

He turned and walked slowly towards the door. Then with his hand on the knob he looked her way again. "Where are you going?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I suppose you'd find out anyway," she said. "I'm going to the Stockton Memorial Hospital in Connecticut. Dr. Grant has offered me a position as O.R. nurse."

Max looked angry again. "I see," he said. "Going back to your old boy friend."

Irene gave him a reproving glance. "You should know better than say a thing like that!"

But the redheaded young man was determined to continue his bitter comments it seemed. He said, "I don't see that he's much better than I am. After all he left the hospital in disgrace."

Before Irene could give him an answer

he flung himself out of the door in a rage.

For a long time after Dr. Max Marshall left Irene sat on the divan lost in her thoughts. The final stinging words of the young surgeon had come as a cruel shock. Now she went over it all in her mind to try and see her position clearly.

She'd been lonely after Ralph Grant had abruptly left the hospital and Max had filled this empty spot in her life. She'd come to be genuinely fond of the young chest surgeon and in spite of Lona's warnings she'd never guessed that there was anything in his past he might be concealing from her.

The letter from the private detective had been a shocking surprise. It gave her entire relationship with Max a dirtiness which she resented. There had been nothing between them of which she need be ashamed and yet this letter soiled it all.

Max might have intended to tell her. She could never be sure of that since she'd found out first from someone else. But now she saw him in a new light and she doubted that she could have found happiness with him. He was selfish and there was a mean streak in him. He'd proven that by his angry remarks before he left.

She sighed. There was nothing to do but forget it and put it down to experience. As for her new job with the young Dr. Grant she had no misgivings in that direction at all. Ralph Grant had always been a good friend and a gentleman when she'd known him in the past, there was no reason to think he might have changed.

In spite of his uncle's wild accusations concerning him she was sure that he'd been done an injustice. She had never been able to understand the older plastic surgeon's attitude and she'd found herself enjoying her work with him less in the last few months.

The phone rang and when she answered it was Lona. The dark girl sounded anxious on the line. "I was worried about you," she said. "What happened?"

"He's been gone quite awhile," she said. "It's all settled."

"What did he say?"

"That he intended to tell me but had been putting it off," Irene said. "It wasn't a very pleasant moment."

"I can imagine," her friend sympathized. "I'm sorry. But you couldn't do anything else."

"He was angry when he left," Irene said. "I think I'm lucky this all happened."

He's not the sort of person I'd hoped he was."

"I could have told you that long ago," Lona said wisely. "But then I've seen more of him than you have."

"I know," she agreed. "I feel exhausted and I have to work in the O.R. in the morning. I'm going right to bed."

"Do that," Lona said. "I'll see you at the hospital tomorrow."

In spite of her good intentions Irene didn't go to bed at once. She kept herself busy doing some washing and even watched the late show on television for awhile. At last she did force herself to turn off the lights but still sleep eluded her troubled mind. She lay in the darkness with her thoughts for a long time after. The last thing she remembered was hearing voices coming from a group leaving a party in the apartment down the hall. Then she fell into a light sleep full of dream phantoms in which she went through several violent versions of the scene she'd just had with Max Marshall.

Irene awoke in the morning feeling tired and with a definite headache that not even strong coffee would cure.

When she arrived at Manhattan General one of the first persons she met was Head Nurse Amelia Blair. The stern, white-haired woman passed in the corridor as Irene waited for an elevator. She gave her an austere nod and Irene thought she was going to stop and discuss her leaving once again, but instead she went on.

Irene was suddenly self-conscious about her position at the hospital. By this time the word would surely be spreading that she was leaving. There was no reason why anyone would guess the truth behind her going, but there would likely be speculation among her co-workers and she would find interest centred on her for a few days.

It was a spotlight she would have liked to avoid. But there was no chance of that. The best she could hope for was that the new coolness between she and Max Marshall wouldn't be noticed and taken into account. As long as she managed to avoid meeting him in the hospital they'd be reasonably safe.

Now her personal worries were lost in the busy routine of the morning. She stopped by the room of the patient on whom the elder Dr. Grant was operating. She was a rather attractive young girl in her teens except for a grotesque patch of

scar tissue all along her upper lip and down one side of her mouth. She had been badly burned in an explosion in an electronics factory.

Irene smiled at the girl on the bed. "We'll soon have you looking pretty," she said.

The patient's large brown eyes looked up at her dreamily. "I'm feeling so relaxed," she said. "I can't believe it. I'm not nervous at all."

"Nothing to be nervous about," Irene promised. She knew that the girl had already had a strong dose of tranquilizing drugs and would soon be on her way to the operating room.

The clamour of the usual hospital sounds were left behind when Irene joined the others on the operating team in the scrub room. Dr. Cabell Grant came in and gave her a nod. She helped him into his gown and then slipped on his rubber gloves. By this time the girl had been wheeled into the operating room and deftly transferred from stretcher to table.

The anaesthetist went about his vital task and soon the girl was lost in a sleep deep enough for the operation to proceed.

Irene had assisted in so many of these operations she had a sixth sense about what the surgeon would require.

"Dermatome!" Cabell demanded gruffly.

Irene quickly handed him the instrument which was of a special type for taking skin grafts and contained a knife and a drum. The assisting surgeon, one of the young interns, had already quickly spread a light coating of metaphene and alcohol on the skin of the girl's groin. For the operation was beginning here with the removal of sufficient skin to make a suitable graft. This was to be a sheet of several inches in diameter of the superficial and part of the deep layers of the skin.

Dr. Cabell Grant worked swiftly and the skin had soon been removed and placed in a waiting tray. The surface was treated and now the actual operation on the girl's scarred face began.

"Scalpel, Nurse!" The senior surgeon said.

Quickly the clever hands manipulated the knife in the outlined area of the destroyed flesh. Occasionally a clamp would be deftly put in place to hold back a small fountain of blood. The knife pared away the damaged area in the girl's face. Then came the transfer by free graft of a piece of skin cut to the exact shape of the cleansed scar area.

Irene handed the surgeon a threaded needle of chronic catgut and he went expertly about fixing the skin in place. The minutes flew swiftly by until at last proper dressings were applied and the surgical team stepped back from the table. The moment of drama under the bright lights was over. The patient was ready to be wheeled back to her room.

Dr. Cabell Grant slipped off his mask and then the rubber gloves. "Fifty-five minutes," he said. "It seemed to go well. By the end of a week we'll be a lot more certain."

Irene knew what he meant. The success of the operation would depend on how the skin graft took. It would be at least a week before the dressing could be removed and if the skin underneath were pink and white then it would only be a month or so before the girl left the hospital with a face restored to its original beauty.

Then the burly senior surgeon turned to her and said, "Please come to my office when you're finished here, Miss Hall. I have several things to go over with you."

She nodded as he wheeled around and stalked out to the scrub room.

The young intern who had assisted with the operation grinned at her. "Sound as if the old man has one of his moods."

"I'm afraid so," she acknowledged with a small smile. "I don't think the warm weather agrees with him."

"He's still got magic hands," the intern said. "Did you see the way he worked on the damaged tissue around that mouth?"

Without waiting for an answer the intern went out to the scrub room as well.

Irene finished her work in the operating room and then changed her clothes and went downstairs to Dr. Cabell Grant's office.

He had a good-sized room on the same floor devoted to his patients. There were about eighteen rooms in the corridor reserved for plastic surgery cases and they were filled most of the time. In the old days Europe had been the centre of aesthetic surgery but now many of the great names and the best training schools were in the United States. And naturally New York had many of the top surgeons in the field.

From Europe, Asia and South America patients came to the famed clinics in New York and naturally Dr.

Cabell Grant's Manhattan General drew a good share of those in need of the plastic surgeon's skill.

He was seated at his desk when she came in. He looked up from the papers he held in his hands and said: "About Mrs. Robinson. I've had a confirming report from the lab. Her skin condition is definitely a malignancy."

"Her operation is scheduled for tomorrow," Irene said. "Will there be any change of plans?"

He nodded. "Yes. I'm going to send her down for X-ray therapy. It never fails when you get these crusty spots with a pearl-coloured border that they prove to be skin cancers."

"Does she know yet?" Irene asked.

"No," the burly senior surgeon sighed. "I'll drop by her room and explain later. And I suppose I'd better put through a call to her husband. They'll both be badly upset, of course. But it's not all that hopeless. I've examined her pretty thoroughly and it is my opinion that intensive X-ray therapy can cure her completely. If it fails there is no reason why surgical removal shouldn't do the job. Fortunately close to a hundred per cent of skin cancers are curable unless they've been neglected for years. Mrs. Robinson's is a fairly recent growth."

"She'll feel better if you explain all that to her," Irene suggested.

He glared at her. "Well of course I'm going to," then he broke into a small smile, "otherwise why do you think I rehearsed the little speech on you?" Without waiting for a reply he continued: "We're doing that youngster with the hare lip tomorrow at nine. Shouldn't take longer than a half hour so we can follow with the nose operation on Mr. Jethro. With the Robinson woman cancelled that's about all we have scheduled."

She said: "There's the woman from Australia. The one who wants to see about having her face lifted. She called from her hotel again. She seemed quite worried. She's leaving for home in a month and would like to have you fit her in right away."

The senior surgeon sighed. "All right. I'll phone now and arrange for her to come by for an appointment this afternoon. Possibly we can arrange to give her the time we have reserved for the Robinson woman."

Irene left him to make the phone call and went back to her routine duties with the patients. There were quite a few

convalescing from operations although they did not keep cases in the hospital any longer than they could help.

At last it was time for lunch and she went downstairs to the busy cafeteria where Lona was waiting for her. When they'd filled their trays they took a table together at the end of the room away from the main entrance.

"Max hasn't shown up since I've been here," Lona said.

Irene glanced apprehensively at the door. "I hope he doesn't come down at all. I certainly don't want to see him."

"Tell me what happened," Lona said.

Irene spent the next ten minutes bringing her up-to-date. "And that's how our romance ended," she said finally with mock brightness.

Lona shrugged. "He's never been popular with me. Too slick. Still he may be telling the truth. He may have intended to tell you."

"I don't really care any more," Irene said. "Not after his performance last night."

"He wasn't very considerate," Lona agreed. "Have you told Dr. Cabell Grant you're leaving?"

"Not yet," Irene said. "We were terribly busy all morning. I thought I'd try this afternoon."

"He'll be a lot tougher about it than Amelia Blair," Lona promised. "And especially if he finds out you're going to work with his nephew."

"I don't care how much he storms," Irene promised. "I've made up my mind and I certainly can't stay on here."

Lona glanced toward the main entrance and her pretty face took on an expression of consternation and she nudged Irene. "Look who's coming in!"

Irene raised her eyes to the main doorway and saw Dr. Max Marshall advancing into the cafeteria with her boss, Dr. Cabell Grant. The two seemed to be having a serious discussion and the senior surgeon looked definitely perturbed.

"How do you like that," Lona demanded. "I give you three guesses what he's talking to your boss about."

Irene looked at the dark girl with dismay. "You don't think he's telling him about my planning to leave?"

"What else?" Lona rolled her eyes. "Now there's a fast worker. He doesn't bother trying to argue with you. He merely puts the pressure on by breaking the news to your boss."

They got up from the table and made

a hurried exit into the corridor. As they waited for the elevator Lona gave her a teasing look. "How much do you bet you'll get an immediate call to Dr. Grant's office when he comes back from lunch?"

"I wouldn't want to take it," she said. "There isn't a doubt in my mind that Max is spending his entire lunch hour goading him about my leaving. He'll be in one of his rages, I'm sure."

Less than a half-hour later she got the summons. She was in Mrs. Robinson's room when the call came. She put down the room phone with a grimace. "You'll have to excuse me," she told the woman, "this sounds like trouble."

When she went into the senior surgeon's office he looked up at her briefly and said: "Take a chair for a moment, Miss Hall." After which he returned to a study of a report on his desk.

Irene took one of the plain chairs in the room and waited. She had an idea Dr. Grant was doing this deliberately to work on her nerves. It was a method he sometimes used with patients who were inclined to be difficult.

At last he put aside the report he'd been studying with furrowed brows and gave all his attention to her. There was no hint of his mood in his expression as his shrewd eyes focused in her direction.

"I called the Australian woman at her hotel," he said. "She'll be arriving about three—Mrs. Barnett. I've marked her in for the morning assuming the preliminary examination this afternoon is satisfactory."

Irene nodded. "I'll be on the lookout for her."

The big man folded his hands on the desk in front of him. "And there is one other thing, Miss Hall. I've heard some disturbing rumours about you."

She knew that this was it. "Really?" she said with a faint smile.

"Yes," he went on in a serious tone. "I've heard from two reliable sources that you're planning to leave the hospital. Since you've been directly associated with my staff it seems you should have told me before anyone else."

"You were so busy," she said. "I was afraid it might upset you. So I waited."

"You're quite right," the big man snapped. "I am upset. You know how much I need you here."

"Believe me, I'm sorry," Irene told him. "But I feel I should make the change."

He stared at her for a moment. "Then there's no chance of your reconsidering this move?"

"I'm afraid not," she said.

"Miss Blair tells me you're planning to go to Connecticut and work for my nephew," he said. "Of course you know my feelings about Ralph."

She met his eyes with a firm look in her own. "I hardly think I'd let anything like that weigh my decision."

"Think it over, Miss Hall," the big man said. "I urgently ask you to think it all over. You're making a hasty, and I feel misguided, move. And I do not like to think of you transferring from my clinic to the one with which my nephew is associated."

She smiled at him incredulously. "I can't see why that should make any difference."

Dr. Cabell Grant was growing more and more upset. He rose from his chair and began to pace back and forth in front of her. "I think you are familiar with what happened here between Ralph and myself. There's no need of going over that ground again. I had high hopes for the boy. I trained him as I would have my own son. I hoped he would take the place of a son in my profession. Naturally I'm angry and disappointed that he failed me."

Since she knew she was leaving anyway she now dared to say what she had hesitated to tell the burly senior surgeon before. "Perhaps you judged him too harshly," she said.

He wheeled on her with a glare. "Not many people would be brash enough to say that to me."

"I didn't mean to offend you, Doctor Grant," she said. "But I feel you share some blame in the matter."

"I see." The big man seemed to be controlling himself with difficulty. He stalked around to the chair behind his desk and sat down again heavily. "It is apparent you are in a rebellious mood, Miss Hall. So there isn't much point in continuing this discussion."

Irene got up. "Then that will be all, Doctor?"

The shrewd eyes studied her again. "Yes," he said. "But there is one thing I feel I should warn you about. Don't take my nephew's word too seriously in anything. In my opinion he is not at all reliable."

"Thank you," she said quietly. "I'll keep that in mind."

Irene settled down to completing some

charts and bringing them up to date. Then she had a call from a patient which she transferred to Dr. Grant. After this she spent some time checking the drug cabinet and making sure their stock was complete. Before she realised it was almost three o'clock and she remembered that the Australian patient was due at that time.

The elevator door nearest the desk opened and a tall, strikingly pretty brunette got out and came directly across to where Irene sat. She got up quickly and smiled at the newcomer, at the same time wondering what sort of plastic surgery such a beauty would require.

She said: "I imagine you're Mrs. Barnett. Dr. Grant is expecting you."

The attractive girl smiled, looking cool and at ease in a chic white summer dress. "I think you're making a mistake," she said. "I've come to see you not Dr. Grant. I'm Mrs. Marshall."

Irene stared at the pretty face in surprise. "Mrs. Marshall?"

"Yes," she said, a special insinuation in her tone. "Max's wife."

This meeting was so entirely unexpected that momentarily Irene found herself at a loss for words. In the short silence she saw the eyes of the lovely woman in the white dress appraise her with a cool precision.

At last she said: "I didn't expect to meet you, Mrs. Marshall. I've heard from your investigator."

The brunette woman nodded. "I know that, Miss Hall. But I felt we should meet. I've made a rather long journey because of you."

"I understood you were in California," Irene said.

"I was until yesterday," Max Marshall's wife said and then gave her another of her tantalizing smiles. "I'd like to have a few minutes serious conversation with you."

By this time Irene had recovered sufficiently from the shock of it all to resent this woman's intrusion. She said: "I'm afraid that's quite impossible here."

"I understand," the brunette woman agreed. "You're on duty and I don't wish to interfere. But I'll wait for you at my hotel. It's just up the block. I'm staying at the St. Moritz."

Irene hesitated. "I really don't think we have anything to discuss," she said.

"On the contrary I'm sure we do," Max Marshall's wife said firmly. "What time do you finish here?"

"In an hour."

"I'll meet you in the lobby of the St. Moritz," the brunette girl said. "Please come. I'd consider it a favour."

Again Irene was going to refuse but something held her back. She couldn't help being curious about why Mrs. Marshall had made the sudden decision to come to New York. Also she would like to satisfy herself with more of the details of the marriage that Max insisted he wanted to end. This was one way to find out. Even if this woman had humiliated her by sending a warning through a private detective there were many sides to the problem. Irene wanted to be as fair as possible.

She said, "I don't see that anything can be accomplished by this. But if you wish I'll meet you in the St. Moritz lobby at four-fifteen."

"Thank you," the brunette girl said. "I won't detain you any longer." And with another stiff smile she turned and went back to the elevator.

Irene had been caught off-guard and the interview left her in a flurry of excitement. She was not sure she had done right in agreeing to meet Max's wife. But perhaps it would help set her mind at ease.

As she tried to straighten out her thoughts the elevator opened again and a small, thin woman emerged. She wore a gay print dress and Irene decided this must be Mrs. Barnett from Australia who had called the doctor. As she came closer it was obvious that she had once been a beauty but now her face had a worn, middle-aged look.

She smiled tentatively at Irene. "I have an appointment with Dr. Grant," she said in an accent that sounded definitely British. "My name is Barnett."

"Of course, Mrs. Barnett," Irene said. "You're expected. I'll show you to the doctor's office."

The next half-hour was taken up by the examination of the patient. Irene assisted Dr. Grant and it was definitely decided to put Mrs. Barnett on the operating schedule the next morning for a face-lifting.

She was worried about the length of time she would be convalescent. "I must be home by the end of the month," she explained. "You're certain I'll be able to leave by then?"

"Most certainly," Dr. Grant assured her. "We will only be doing your eyes and cheeks. There is no flabbiness in the neck area that needs attention. It is

actually a rather simple operation done under a local anaesthesia."

"Do you wish me to check into the hospital today?" Mrs. Barnett asked.

"Yes," Dr. Cabell Grant addressed himself to Irene. "You make arrangements for her, Miss Hall."

Irene's last chore of the afternoon was looking after the Australian woman's admittance to the hospital. As soon as she finished she changed her clothes and left. It was another warm afternoon and she felt that the plain brown dress she'd worn to work was much too shabby looking for her visit to the St. Moritz Hotel. But she didn't have time to go back to the apartment and change. She wished that she'd made the appointment for a later hour.

Meeting Max's wife was going to be embarrassing enough and feeling that her clothes were drab and unsuitable made it a real ordeal. She made her way up the block slowly, reluctant to enter the smart hotel.

She passed by the sidewalk café with its tables on the pavement behind a small iron railing. Several smartly dressed couples and distinguished looking middle-aged men were out there enjoying a late afternoon treat. She turned the corner and mustering all her nerve made her way through the big revolving door. The lobby was cooled with air-conditioning and seemed filled with busy, chattering people. As she stood there a moment trying to locate Mrs. Marshall she was happy to realise that no one noticed her. They were all too busy with their own affairs and conversations.

Irene moved further into the lobby and then saw Max's wife rise from a chair in the corner and wave to her. She went quickly across to her.

The brunette girl smiled. "I was afraid you mightn't come." She glanced around and then said, "I think we have the most quiet corner. Shall we sit here?"

"Anywhere," Irene agreed.

They sat down in the comfortable upholstered chairs and Irene was glad that they were suitably isolated from anyone else in the room. The brunette girl opened her purse and took out a pack of cigarettes and offered it to her. "Care for one?"

Irene shook her head. "I rarely smoke," she said.

"I do, all the time," Max's wife said, helping herself to one and lighting it. "By the way my name is Betty. Please

don't be formal. And yours, of course, is Irene."

"The detective would have told you that," Irene said quietly.

Betty Marshall smiled grimly. "I have an idea you won't easily forgive me for that detective. But please try to understand there was nothing personal about it. I was simply trying to look after my interests from across the continent."

"Why have you asked me here?"

"To get to know you better."

"Is that important?" Irene asked.

The brunette girl's eyes narrowed. "Yes, I think so. I've been anxious to meet you. You know you've turned poor Maxie's rather light head."

"I want you to understand," Irene said firmly, "I had no idea that Max was married."

Betty exhaled slim channels of smoke from her shapely nostrils. "I spent an hour this morning listening to his story. I know all about it. It seems I timed my visit here at the moment of decision. He said you showed him the investigator's letter last night and told him to get out."

"It wasn't very pleasant," Irene said.

"I gathered that." The brunette girl shrugged. "I don't know what Max told you about us. I guess it's been a one-sided marriage. I've tried desperately to hold on to him." She paused and studied her cigarette as the smoke curled up from its tip. "But I've reached the limit. I have some pride. Max is going to have his divorce."

So that was it! Max had probably insisted that his wife see her and tell her about their plans. Irene realized that she couldn't have cared less. Whatever liking she'd had for the young chest surgeon had been of a casual nature and now she knew that she wanted only to forget him.

"I appreciate your telling me," she said. "But I'm really not interested."

Betty Marshall's eyes opened wide at this. "You don't intend to marry him?"

"I don't even want to see him again."

The brunette girl gave a mirthless little laugh. "This is a surprise. I wonder how Max will feel when he finds out? He's still very serious about you."

"I'm sorry for that," Irene said sincerely. "Perhaps he may change his mind about a divorce."

"He may," Betty Marshall said, "but I won't. There's been nothing but conflict between us from the beginning. Maybe Max thought it would work because I have too much money and he has too expensive tastes. But even my

generosity didn't seem to bring us any happiness. He insisted on continuing his career and you know how time consuming a doctor's practice can be. It didn't leave much time for fun and travel."

"Perhaps if you both compromised a little," Irene suggested, struck by the melancholy note in the dark girl's recital.

Max's wife smiled. "I'm not very good at it. And Max likes to be stubborn. Anyway he thinks he's in love with you."

"He'd better forget that."

Betty shrugged and stubbed out her cigarette. "He'll recover and then it will be somebody else. I have an idea Max is the sort of man who needs his freedom and I'm going to see that he gets it."

Irene looked down at her hands. "I have some feeling of guilt in this," she said. "I suppose I didn't probe very deeply or I'd have found out something of his past. Anyway it's over now and I hope it works out all right for you both."

"You're leaving your position at the hospital?" Betty Marshall said.

She nodded. "Yes. I'm tired of the city."

"Don't let Max ruin things for you," Betty advised her. "Don't make this change in your life unless you really want to do it."

"I'd have made the decision anyway," Irene smiled at the brunette girl. "I suppose this only brought it about sooner."

Betty Marshall studied her again, this time with a slight sadness in her expression. "In a way I'm disappointed. You're very nice. You'd make Max a good wife you know. And I would like to see him settled and happy. I do love him a great deal."

Irene felt a fullness in her throat. She was touched by the girl's frank statement. "Thank you," she said at last in a quiet voice.

Betty Marshall was still standing watching after her when she left the hotel lobby. The meeting had been quite unlike anything she'd expected. It had taken an oddly different turning. And she had been impressed by Betty Marshall and touched by the sadness just barely concealed by the chic brunette's brittle assurance.

Back in the apartment she felt lonely and restless. The two encounters had drained a lot from her physically and yet left her in a state of nervous tension. So many things had taken place in the past week to change her life. It was incredible

the changes that often waited just around the corner for you. Life could be more surprising than the most startling mystery play. And the coincidences of every day existence simply wouldn't be accepted by any reader of a work of fiction.

It was much past her regular dinner time when she finally made herself a simple salad plate. A rueful smile crossed her face as she sat down to it and remembered the dinner she'd prepared for Max the night before. The contrast was amusing. That was one of the problems of living alone, too often you didn't take interest enough in preparing the proper kind of meals. Luckily she always had at least one complete meal

at the hospital and during the cooler months she usually had a hot meat or fish dinner.

At long last she began to feel sleepy and she settled her head deeply in the pillow with a small sigh. It had been a long, trying day. She was glad to be at the end of it.

Then through the haze of sleep gathering about her came the clamour of the phone ringing. She sat up with startling suddenness, fully awake again. Quickly she picked up the receiver.

"Hello," a familiar male voice came from the other end of the line. "I hope I didn't wake you up, Irene." It was Dr. Ralph Grant calling her!

CHAPTER TWO

IRENE rarely had calls at this hour of the night and a call from young Dr. Grant was even more unusual. She made an attempt at sounding as if it were a quite ordinary happening.

"It's all right," she assured him, "I wasn't asleep—I'd only got into bed."

"I tried to get you at the hospital this afternoon but you'd left." Ralph Grant spoke in an apologetic tone. "I was called to New Haven to see a prospective patient and this is the first chance I've had to try your apartment."

"I've spoken to the front office about leaving the hospital," Irene said. "And I also told your uncle today."

"I know." Young Grant's voice sounded grim. "That's the reason I'm making this call. He phoned me this afternoon."

"Oh, no!" Irene gasped. "Why did he do that?"

"It was very formal and professional I assure you," Ralph Grant said. "He accused me of using underhand methods to rob his staff. He seems to think you have no right leaving him and I'm in the wrong for offering you a job."

"But that's ridiculous!"

"I know," Ralph agreed. "But then so are many of the things Uncle Cabell has said and done. Did he try his bullying on you as well?"

"He wasn't very happy about it,"

Irene said. "But I thought he'd accepted the situation."

Ralph Grant sounded worried. "You really do want to leave Manhattan General don't you?"

"I'm doing that whether I take a job with you or not," she said.

"I wanted to talk to you about it before you went back to the hospital tomorrow so we'd be sure and understand each other," the young doctor said. "I don't know what sort of story my uncle may have cooked up for you."

Irene laughed. "Whatever he says won't interest me. I've given my notice."

"Fine." Ralph Grant sounded pleased. "Then we'll expect you in Stockton a week from Monday. I have a boarding place lined up for you. It's a nice cottage owned by a road engineer and his wife. They take only one boarder so it's like being part of their family."

"Sounds a lot less cold than my New York living arrangements," Irene agreed. "Living alone in an apartment in this big city can be pretty desolate."

"It won't all be fun," the young doctor warned her. "We've a busy hospital here."

"I'll enjoy that," she said.

They said their goodnights and Irene put down the phone. With the room in darkness again she arranged herself comfortably in bed and tried to fasten

her thoughts on sleep. She'd almost dozed off when Ralph called but the phone conversation had thoroughly awakened her. Now she lay there with dozens of new thoughts surging through her mind.

Next morning at the hospital was a busy one. She checked with the floor nurse regarding the three patients scheduled for operations, and found that they had all been looked after and given the initial dosage of tranquilizer that was part of Dr. Cabell Grant's plan of medication.

Next she stopped by Mrs. Robinson's room for a moment. Mrs. Robinson was a pale, slender woman of about sixty. She had been a librarian for many years and spent every possible moment with a book. Seeing Irene enter her room she looked up from the novel with which she'd already started the day and smiled.

"I understand you're to have some radiation treatments," Irene said, making her tone pleasantly casual.

The older woman sighed. "You understand what that means?"

"That Dr. Grant feels it's the preferred treatment for your case," Irene said. "He refuses to operate if there is any easier way."

"I don't know," Mrs. Robinson was doubtful. "He's talked with both my husband and me. You see this is a skin cancer I have."

"Yes," Irene said. "And radiation is always tried first in cases like yours. Most of the time they clear right up."

"It's a little frightening," the woman in bed said with a worried look crossing her face. "Cancer is such a dread disease."

"Not when it's caught in time," Irene assured her. "And I think we can count on it yours is in the early stage. Don't you worry!"

Mrs. Robinson smiled faintly. "You have so much enthusiasm and you're so optimistic I feel better already."

"See that you stay in that frame of mind," Irene told her as she started to leave. "It's a vital part of the cure."

Entering the ante room off the main operating theatre she quickly scrubbed and put on her cap, mask and gown. Then she assisted Dr. Cabell Grant into his gown and slipped rubber gloves on his freshly scrubbed and powdered hands.

The big man seemed in none too good a mood. "I thought you were going to be late," he complained.

"I stopped by a moment with Mrs.

Robinson," Irene said. "I stayed a few minutes longer than I should have."

He glared at her above his mask. "You did! Your work-is here this morning."

The boy who was to have the hare lip restored had already been wheeled into the operating room. And the anaesthetist soon gave Dr. Cabell Grant the nod indicating his small patient was ready.

The drama began in its familiar stage setting under the bright beam of light that shone from the glass dome overhead. The team grouped around the thin form under the sterile sheet went about their task with the precise haste that long training and experience had made possible. In little more than a half-hour the boy's ugly deformity had vanished with the magic aid of the big burly doctor's skilled hands.

Mr. Jethro, the nose patient, took about the same time. And they were then ready for the third and last patient of the morning, Mrs. Barnett, the woman from Australia who wanted her face lifting looked after in time to leave for her home within a month.

The operation was being done with local anaesthesia. Dr. Grant began by cutting off a strip of skin just under the patient's hair and this gave him a chance to lift the skin of the upper face and draw it taut. Next he worked in the area of the mouth and cutting in this case was around the ears. Again the skin was drawn tightly and stitched in place. Neither of these scars would show as they would be hidden by the hair. Mrs. Barnett was wheeled away to her room knowing that within a week she would be able to see the first results of the operation and have the pleasure of seeing herself looking ten or fifteen years younger with the flabby cheeks and wrinkled eyes that had aged her completely vanished.

Dr. Cabell Grant approached Irene before he left the operating area and asked, "Do you have lunch with anyone special?"

The question was not an expected one. Irene found herself blushing as she said: "I usually have it with one of the other nurses."

"Change your plans for today" He made it an order. "I have several things to talk to you about and I'd like to make use of the lunch hour."

She found it a strange and rather embarrassing experience standing in line with her tray in the senior surgeon's company. Dr. Grant complained about

the way the roast beef was done and managed to find something wrong with everything that the cafeteria shelves offered right down to the dessert.

When they were at last seated he said, "I have never enjoyed cafeteria food anywhere. I eat here only because it saves time and I have no choice." He glared at her across the table.

"I called my nephew yesterday and gave him a piece of my mind for trying to take you away from my staff."

She said, "But that's silly. The move is all my own idea."

"That's your version of it," Cabell Grant said in a tone that indicated he didn't believe her story. "I gave Ralph my view of what he is doing."

"You're being very unfair."

"Unfair?" He glanced at her with upraised eyebrows. "I have spent a lot of time training you, young lady. Now you leave me with only a fortnight's notice to join someone else who owes their training to me as well, and you talk about being unfair!"

It seemed this was the time to say it to him plainly. And Irene did. "Why," she asked, "have you changed so towards Ralph? You seem to be trying to get him out of the profession."

Dr. Cabell Grant's fleshy face took on a purplish tone. "I don't think I understand what you're insinuating," he said in a harsh voice.

"I'm simply telling you the truth. A lot of people in the hospital here feel the same as I do about it but they hesitate to come out and say so."

She had never seen the senior surgeon quite so upset. He leaned across the table. "What has my nephew told you about me?"

"Not a thing!" she said with an incredulous smile. "It's your own actions that speak against you."

"I'm not naive enough to accept that nonsense!" Dr. Cabell Grant's face was a picture of rage. "Anything he tells you about me is a pack of lies! I've been like a father to that young man. And how did he repay me? Almost caused a patient's suicide and involved me in a nasty scandal."

It was hard to tell what the next turn of the conversation would have been. For at that moment the whole atmosphere at the table changed. This came about when a familiar male voice behind Irene said: "The other tables seem filled. Do you two mind if I join you?"

Irene glanced up to face Dr. Max

Marshall, who was wearing a sardonic smile as he put the question to them. Before she could answer the senior surgeon spoke for them both.

"Of course, Marshall! Glad to have you."

The two men discussed their work for several minutes and Irene hurried through her dessert and finished her coffee. She saw Lona leaving the cafeteria and raised her hand as a signal for the dark girl to wait for her.

Then she got up and excused herself. "I'll leave you two to settle the hospital affairs alone," she said with a polite smile. "I have a friend waiting for me."

Max looked at her with accusing eyes as he stood up. Dr. Cabell Grant let her see his annoyance as he joined the younger doctor on his feet.

"We didn't get far with our little talk," he said in a vinegar tone.

"Far enough," she answered and left them.

The two girls took the elevator upstairs and Irene went back to her own floor. There were no patients to be interviewed but plenty of routine care to be given the patients already on hand.

She finished her charts and then went the rounds of the rooms of the various patients before turning them over to Miss Parkinson who looked after the relief shift.

The thin veteran of many hospital years greeted Irene with an acid smile. "What are all the complaints today? We always get them on the relief shift, that's why I hate it."

"Nothing too serious," Irene said with a small chuckle. "Your worst problem will be a Mr. Jethro. The one who had his nose done today."

Miss Parkinson nodded. "I saw him yesterday. Lean and livery type. I knew he'd be hard to handle."

"I told him," Irene said, "that you'd be along with a sedative shortly."

"A pleasure," Miss Parkinson agreed grimly. "I'll make it as strong as the doctor allows."

"Everyone else doing very well," Irene said as she checked through the other patients' charts with the relief nurse.

When she got home to her apartment she found that the mailman had left several letters under her door. One was from her mother and another was a bill from a department store with which she had an account. But it was the third letter that caught her attention. It was written in a fine neat hand and in the



"And how did he repay me? Almost caused a patient's suicide and involved me in a nasty scandal."

upper left corner of the envelope was the return address: *Mrs. Betty Marshall, P.O. Box 621, Fullerton, California.*

Irene glanced at the postmark and saw that the letter had been mailed in New York City. Probably before Betty Marshall had taken a jet back home. She sat down on the divan and quickly tore it open. The paper bore a faint scent of some expensive perfume typical of Max's wife. It was just a short note written in the same neat hand that had addressed the envelope.

"Dear Miss Hall, I am writing this before leaving for California again. In spite of your good wishes I'm afraid that Max and I were unable to reconcile our differences. Perhaps the gulf between us has been there too long or perhaps Max is really in love with someone else. Namely you! At least he claims that he is and we have come to an agreement about the divorce. Good luck, Betty M."

She read the letter twice before putting it down on the coffee table beside her.

She and Max had many things in common. Likely she had voiced her views about divorce and marriage and

so scared him into silence about his own predicament. A silence that had been rudely violated by the letter from Betty's hired investigator. Irene had felt so cheapened she'd turned all her anger against the red haired young chest surgeon. Now she began to give the situation second thoughts. With the developments that had taken place there was no longer a great urgency that she should leave Manhattan General.

On the other hand she no longer really enjoyed working for Dr. Cabell Grant and this was an opportunity to move to a smaller city and enjoy better working conditions. At least she hoped they would be better. If there should be anything in the future for her and Max it could come about no matter where she might be. If Max were interested enough he'd seek her out wherever she went.

And he had shown up poorly the night she'd presented him with the letter. Although in the light of events since he had told her the truth. And that was definitely in his favour since she'd too quickly put him down as a liar.

She was just finishing her dinner dishes when the phone rang and it was Max. It occurred to her that Betty might have

mentioned she was sending her a note although he made no reference to it.

He was in a much subdued mood.

"I have no desire to embarrass you," he said. "But I do want you to know two things. Although I was not honest with you as I know I should have been I do love you and I am getting my divorce."

Irene said: "Max it really doesn't matter now."

He became more pressing in tone. "Don't be so melodramatic. There have been all kinds of cases like ours before. I was wrong. But any wrong I did can be corrected if you're reasonable. If you ever really cared anything for me."

This last was in such a plaintive tone that she found herself saying, "I did care for you, Max. Perhaps a great deal more than you realize. But the picture has been shattered. Give me some time to put the pieces together again. Maybe I'll feel differently after awhile."

"Not in Connecticut you won't," Max said.

"Why not?"

"Don't think I haven't heard about you and Ralph Grant being good friends. I know there won't be any chance for me once you go up there with him."

Irene tried not to be annoyed. "You're being silly, Max. I'm going to join the clinic in Connecticut as a nurse and that's all there is to it."

"Why can't you stay on at Manhattan General? I'll not even try to see you until my divorce is final if that will make any difference."

"It wouldn't."

"You must have a reason for being so determined to go. Dr. Grant thinks you're making a mistake," Max said.

She felt tired and troubled and wished he wouldn't go on arguing. "He's one of the main reasons for my wanting to make a change. He's very difficult."

"I realize that," Max said. "But he is a fine surgeon."

"I'd be the last to argue that point," she said. "Just let's say I've had enough and more."

There was a moment of silence on the line. Then Max said: "Can't we get together before you go? It's maddening just seeing you in snapshots at the hospital and not being able to talk to you on a personal basis even then."

"No, Max," she said, adamant in this. "Later, maybe. Not now."

"That means my going to Connecticut I suppose."

"It's not the end of the world," Irene said lightly, "although you seem to make it sound that way."

"That's final?" he asked, still not wanting to accept it.

"I'm afraid so," she said. "You know I still think you've made a mistake in asking Betty for a divorce."

"That's because you don't understand," he said, slight anger coming into his voice. "Anyway I'd rather not discuss it with you. It only makes things more complex."

"Have it your way then," she said. "And goodbye, Max."

She hung up quickly without giving him further chance to argue. She had been honest with him. Now he knew how she felt and what his prospects might be. At this point and with his marriage to Betty still a fact she had no desire to give him any more encouragement.

During the rest of her time at Manhattan General neither she nor Max spoke to each other again. In fact she only caught a glimpse of him once. She was sure that the young chest surgeon made a point to keep out of her way. Irene found herself beginning to re-appraise him and seeing him in a somewhat better light.

The last days at the big New York Hospital were busy ones. Miss Parkinson was taking over on the day shift and she spent quite a bit of time explaining the routine of Dr. Grant's appointments and the other things pertaining to his office work that did not enter into the relief supervisor's duties.

Miss Parkinson was slightly aghast at the amount of records to be kept and the many phone calls to be looked after. "I'm beginning to think I've made a bad mistake," she told Irene. "There's more work to this than I expected."

Irene smiled. "It really sounds worse than it is. Give yourself a few days before you let yourself get discouraged. I'm sure you'll be able to handle it."

"If Dr. Grant wasn't so hard to work with," Miss Parkinson complained. "But you never know when he's going to arrive in a mood these days. In the last year or two that man's disposition has curdled."

"That's the main hazard of the job," Irene agreed. "You really have to develop a special technique for handling him as well."

The angular Miss Parkinson gave a small groan of despair. "I won't have

time to do the regular work let alone cater to him!"

In the end she did very well in the trial few days before Irene actually left. There was no question of her competence and she was a hard worker. And anyone associated with the senior surgeon was bound to work hard.

On Irene's last afternoon on the job he had her come into his office for a final talk. He looked glum and strangely unsure of himself as he studied her across his desk. "No chance of a last minute conversion?" he asked. "I'd still like to see you stay."

"I appreciate that," Irene smiled. "And if I'm especially anxious for a reference some day I'll come to you."

"And I'll see that you get it," the burly man assured her. He dropped his eyes and scowled at his desk top. "But I'd never give that nephew of mine one. I hate to think of you spoiling a promising career by going to that hick town clinic run by a worn-out old doctor and a young fraud."

Irene felt herself grow angry for a moment but she made up her mind she wouldn't lose her temper in spite of what he'd said. This could very well be the last time they'd ever meet and there was no point in ending their association on a note of bitterness. Even if she had to take more than she felt proper she refused to show offence.

She said calmly, "Stockton is hardly a hick town! It has one of the finest suburban developments in the state. And Stockton Memorial is considered a first rate hospital. As for Dr. Franz Lederer who heads it, his reputation is international."

The senior surgeon gave her an ironic smile. "Ralph must have been quoting to you from brochures. You sound like a promotion hack. Nothing is all that perfect. Certainly not Stockton Memorial. You'll find out when you get there."

"I'll remember to put on my rose-coloured glasses," Irene smiled.

But Dr. Cabell Grant was deadly serious. "You'll need them plenty of times before you've finished. And remember what I told you about Ralph. Don't expect him to be honest with you or live up to his word. His word is valueless."

"Those are pretty strong statements," she said.

"My next will be even stronger," Dr. Cabell Grant announced. "And I must

warn you since you will be working for him. He is a liar!"

Irene shrugged. "I've always found him extremely honourable."

The old doctor nodded grimly. "Wait and see! You'll come back here one day and tell me I was right."

"I hope not," Irene said with a smile. "Thank you, anyway, I'm sure your intentions are good."

Dr. Cabell Grant stood up as a signal the talk was over. "They are the best. And if you change your mind at any time you'll be welcome on my staff again." He paused briefly and added, "Whatever my nephew may say about me I hope you'll take it with a grain of salt."

Irene who had also risen from her chair found it hard to conceal her surprise at this. "I'll remember, Doctor," she promised.

All that was left was to say goodbye to a few of the older patients and cronies on the Manhattan General staff. She really had few close friends at the hospital with the exception of Lona. She'd already said goodbye to her in the cafeteria at lunch time and Lona had taken over her apartment and furniture.

So now she stopped by the rooms of a few of the patients she knew best. Many of the cases had already moved on and the new ones had been entered by Miss Parkinson so Irene met them in only the most casual way.

But Jake was still waiting to be discharged. His pedicle skin graft had taken well and his cheek showed small sign of the operation. The graft had been detached from his arm days ago and he was now able to go about normally.

He smiled as Irene came to the door. "You're making it out of here one day ahead of me," he said. "Wish I was going now."

"You look wonderful," she told him.

"I feel wonderful," he said sincerely. "Thank you for all you did to help, Miss Hall." He fumbled in his pyjama pocket and handed her a soiled, crumpled business card. "I dug that out of my stuff this morning so I'd have it ready. If you're ever in Manhattan and need a cabby's help call me at that number and I'll give you my personal attention."

"Thanks, Jake," she said. "Best of luck."

"Same to you, Miss Hall," he said as he saw her to the door.

Mrs. Robinson, the woman with the

face cancer was now taking radiation treatments. She came to the hospital daily but lived at home. Mr. Jethro had gone grumpily on his way. The boy with the lovely brown eyes who'd had his hare lip rebuilt had also gone home.

But Mrs. Barnett, the face lifting case from Australia, was still there and she was the next one Irene visited. Except for some tiny white scars at her temples and in the area of her ears there was no trace of the scalpel's work on the Australian woman's face. Her appearance had been completely rejuvenated by the operation and she greeted Irene cordially when she came in.

"I'm going to miss you," Mrs. Barnett said.

"I'll miss you as well," Irene told her. "You look so lovely! I'm sure Dr. Grant must be pleased. Wait till you get home!"

The middle-aged woman's pleasure was touching. "I'm a trifle self conscious about it yet," she said with a careful smile.

"No need to be," she said. "It's your own face and well worth the effort you've gone to. I hope it helps you in business."

"I'm sure it will," Mrs. Barnett said. "For one thing I should be less nervous." "Wait till your husband sees you!" Irene's eyes twinkled.

Mrs. Barnett blushed, looking delightfully proud and excited. "I've been thinking about that every minute since the operation. I hope he approves."

"He'll be proposing to you all over again," Irene promised.

Then they said their goodbyes and she had finished her round of the patients' rooms. She went back to Miss Parkinson at the desk. Glancing at the big clock on the wall above them she said: "Well, I guess my time has come."

"I wish you could stay on a few more days until I get more used to it all," Miss Parkinson wailed. "I dread tomorrow alone."

Irene laughed. "Just keep up as you've been doing these last few days and you'll have nothing to worry about. I'm the one who's going to have to make adjustments."

Next day, during the pleasantly scenic bus ride to the small town in Connecticut where the new hospital was located, she considered what these might be. At the Manhattan General she had been a combination of office secretary and department supervisor. It wasn't likely

she'd play such an important role at the Stockton Hospital. She had no real idea of the size of their plastic surgery department but suspected it would be smaller than the one in New York.

She would be working under the direction of Dr. Ralph Grant whom she remembered as affable and quietly efficient in a way quite different from his uncle. Of course Dr. Franz Lederer was the nominal head of the department but from the rumours she'd heard he was virtually retired and acted only as an adviser.

In any case she looked forward to the quieter tempo of living in a small town and the new contacts she'd be making in the field. Her thoughts were brought to a halt when the bus entered the outskirts of a small town which a white sign with large black lettering announced as Stockton, Connecticut. Population 2,465.

Irene smiled as she told herself they could now make it 2,466. The town could number a new nurse among its permanent residents. The main street was typical of any small New England town. The buildings were mostly brick and fairly ancient and the store fronts and signs had a quaint other era atmosphere about them. Dark green and white seemed to be the paint combination on the store fronts that was most predominant and as they passed from the main street with its rows of stores on each side to the more residential area of the town the same paint scheme was carried out in many of the houses, a great majority of them were white with green shutters.

The bus stop was a combination restaurant and gasoline station set a short distance off the road. When the bus pulled in and came to a stop Irene looked out the nearest window and saw the familiar face of Dr. Ralph Grant. The young doctor was wearing fawn trousers and a dark sports jacket and he was standing in the doorway of the restaurant anxiously scanning the bus for a sign of her. The sight of his even-featured, intelligent young face with his sandy crew-cut hair gave her a warm feeling of nostalgia. She had liked Ralph a lot! And it had been more than a year since they'd met. She leaned towards the window and waved hoping that he would catch the gesture.

Almost immediately a smile came to his face and he waved back. When she

stepped off the bus he was waiting to assist her.

"Well!" He looked her over with admiring eyes. She had worn a smart light blue outfit for the journey and hoped that he would like it. There was no question that he did. He went on: "You're looking wonderful."

"Hard work and hot weather," she told him with a small laugh. "You're looking very well yourself."

"Country air and the same hard work," Ralph said. "What about your luggage?"

"I have a trunk coming down by the bus baggage carrier tomorrow," she said. "And I'm afraid I have four large suitcases with me as well."

"Lot's of room for them," Ralph said. "This sedan of mine has a fine big trunk." He nodded in the direction of a modest black car parked in the rear of the service station.

A few minutes later Ralph had the bags safely loaded in his trunk and they were driving up a hilly street that was lined with great elm trees whose leaves almost met in the sky above the middle of the street to form a continuous leafy arch. Nicely set back from the sidewalks were dozens of rich-looking suburban homes.

"This is lovely," Irene exulted. "What a change from the steaming summer streets in the city."

"I like it here," Ralph said. They came to the top of the street and made a sharp right turn. "Just ahead on the hill is our hospital."

Irene caught her first glimpse of the big red-bricked building with its white trim windows and doors and ivy running decoratively up its walls. It was nicely located with what she imagined would be a fine view of the town below.

As they passed the entrance with its asphalt driveway Ralph said: "There are two smaller wings jutting out from the back that you can't see from here. We're in one of them."

Irene decided this would be a good time to enquire about the size of the clinic. "How many beds do you have?" she asked.

"We can handle a dozen patients," Ralph told her. "And there's available space in other parts of the hospital if we need it. And we often do. There's just Dr. Lederer and myself who do the operating but we have the balance of the hospital staff to assist us in their various specialties."

"Sounds like an excellent arrangement," Irene said.

"It's similar to the one at Manhattan General in many ways." Ralph looked away from the wheel for a moment with a smile. "I hope you like it here."

She glanced around at the pleasant, if slightly more modest homes, they were passing now. "It seems so peaceful. How can I help like it?"

"We've only got one nurse on each shift at the hospital for our department," Ralph said. "So you can imagine that most of the time it is far from peaceful. But it is stimulating and you'll find Dr. Lederer a wizard."

"Yes, I've heard about him from many sources," Irene said.

"He's a genius in our field," Ralph said. "You'll be impressed by him."

As he spoke he headed the car into a concrete driveway beside a pleasant ranch style house in redwood and grey stone. Irene guessed this must be her boarding place and was delighted at its outer appearance.

She found the inside just as attractive. And the small, animated blonde girl who was the wife of the district road engineer who owned the house was a jolly, friendly person.

She showed Irene her room which seemed large and airy although it was at the rear of the house where the view was not as good. Mrs. Clyde Wentworth winked at her. "We're only human I'm afraid. We've kept the bedroom with the best view for our own. But I think you'll find this all right."

Irene glanced around the pleasant room with its antique canopy bed in New England style and colourful oval hooked rug in the centre of the floor. "I love it!" she said. "How do you ever keep it so clean?"

The blonde girl laughed. "Don't give me too much credit. We have no city soot and grime to contend with here and the highway is paved so there's no dust. By the way my name is Ellen."

Ralph said: "Irene has a trunk coming tomorrow."

"Fine," Ellen Wentworth nodded. "You can put it in the storage part of the basement if you'd prefer. There's lots of room."

"Thank you," Irene said. "Have you any children?"

The blonde girl smiled. "We have a daughter who'll be four years old this November. She's one of Dr. Grant's patients now. That's how I happened to

hear you were coming and the doctor was looking for a place for you. I hoped you'd like this well enough to take it."

Irene looked from Ellen to Ralph and said, "I'm deeply in debt to you both. And it's handy for the hospital. I can easily walk there."

"Except during January snow drifts," Ralph warned her with an amused look. "We get all the four seasons here!"

Ellen said: "What will your working hours be?"

"She'll be on the day shift from eight to four," Ralph volunteered the information and this was the first time that Irene had heard any word about it herself.

"You won't have to worry about transportation in the morning then," Ellen Wentworth said. "Clyde goes to work at eight as well, and he drives right by the hospital."

Ralph glanced at his watch. "I'm afraid I'll have to get back soon. Would you like to go over the hospital and see our set up now or would you rather wait until the morning?"

Irene hesitated. "That's a question! I am anxious to see things but it is getting late and you've given me so much time already. I hope I haven't held you back too much with your work."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "But I have a patient I want to check before it gets too late."

Ellen Wentworth spoke up, "I don't want to interfere with what is plainly not my business but it's close to four and by the time Irene gets unpacked it will be time for dinner."

"That's true," Ralph agreed quickly. "Let's leave it until morning. Is there anything else I can do?"

"Not a thing," Irene said as they went out to the front door together. "I feel guilty as it is taking so much of your time."

"I planned it so I would be free to meet the bus," he said. "I have a monthly board meeting at the hospital tonight or I'd drop by later for a chat."

Irene had followed him out to his car and they stood alone there for a few minutes in conversation. She took the opportunity to ask about the Wentworth's little girl.

"We'd just met so I didn't like to ask her what was wrong," Irene said. "I was afraid it might sound like prying."

"The youngster had a nasty birthmark on the left side of her face," the young doctor said. "We've done a complete removal and grafting job. She'll be out in a few days. This was the time to get it done. She's a little beauty."

Irene smiled wistfully. "I'm so happy you were able to help them. They seem like a lovely family."

"They are," the young doctor agreed. "In the morning you'll have a chance to meet Dr. Lederer, he's really the chief of our staff. But he doesn't always come in during the afternoons. He's plagued with advanced arthritis and it has cut down on his activities a good deal."

Irene took a deep breath of the pleasant country air and glanced around at the green lawn with its shady trees and the gracious modern house in which she was to live. "This is going to be more like a vacation than work," she said.

Ralph laughed. "Don't jump to any conclusions like that." He held out his hand. "But we are very happy to have you here."

Their eyes met in understanding as his hand closed on hers with a warm clasp of friendship. She smiled up at him. "I've been looking forward to it."

He turned and opened the car door. "We know," he said as he got in, "there was at least one person who didn't approve of what you've done. Uncle Cabell."

"You're so right," she said. "Why is he so bitter towards you?"

The young plastic surgeon's face shadowed. "That's a long story and not a pleasant one. Personally I don't even want to think about it. I don't glory in this feud between us as he seems to." He managed a faint smile. "I'll look for you in the morning then."

She stood in the driveway until he'd driven off. Whatever the trouble was between Ralph Grant and his uncle he had no intention of discussing it with her. It must go a lot deeper than the scandal about the near suicide of the woman patient. Everyone in the Manhattan General knew about that. There would be no point in Ralph being so secretive concerning that incident. There must be something more!

CHAPTER THREE

IRENE spent a busy hour and a half unpacking and arranging her things in the two ample closets in her bedroom. By the time she had taken a shower and changed into a yellow dress that was one of her newest it was nearly six. Ellen had told her they would be having dinner at that hour so she went down the narrow hallway to the combination dining and living room.

A tanned, healthy looking young man in a white knit sports shirt open at the neck and wearing brown slacks looked up from the evening paper he was reading and rose to greet her with a smile.

"I'm Clyde Wentworth," he said. "Welcome to Stockton."

Irene returned his smile. "Thank you. And the wonderful thing is that I feel at home here already."

He waved to an easy chair. "Sit down. Ellen will have dinner ready in a few minutes. I was late getting home with the steaks. We thought we had a few left in the freezer until this morning when we discovered the sixty-four pound cupboard was bare. Of steaks anyway!"

She made herself comfortable in the chair. She liked Clyde Wentworth as well as his wife. The bluff, easy-going young man was the sort of person she'd expected after meeting Ellen. He had a snub nose and round face and his kind grey eyes were in keeping with his brownish hair.

"You are with the state?" she asked as an opener.

"That's right," he folded the newspaper and tossed it on the coffee table before him. "I'm that most wretched of creatures, a civil servant. But I like my job. I supervise road construction and maintenance in this tiny area of the state for which I reap much abuse and a limited sum of money. But I get a lot of air and sunshine and it allows me to have my family in a town like Stockton. That's worth a good deal to me in itself."

"It's much nicer than big city living," Irene agreed. "I've had a taste of that."

Clyde Wentworth hunched down comfortably in the easy chair and regarded her with friendly eyes. "Well, you can argue it two ways," he said. "There are cultural and other advantages

that you can get only in the big cities but many of these are available to us with transportation so easy today. Most people can be in a centre in an hour or two with expressways and modern cars. There are so many fine features about small town living that I'm sold on it personally."

"It must be nice for your little girl," Irene said.

"Annie is thriving on it," he said. "And by a streak of luck Dr. Lederer has his clinic right here in Stockton where we needed it. Have you seen Annie?"

"No," she said. "I hadn't time to get to the hospital this afternoon."

The young engineer leaned forward enthusiastically. "Those people at the hospital are magicians. Annie had an ugly birthmark. A big one I mean, almost all one side of her face. Now she looks perfectly normal."

"I hear she's a beauty," Irene said.

At this point Ellen came in. She wore a dainty white apron over her blue dress. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting like this for dinner," she apologized. "But we made a small error about our stockpile of steaks. They're done now."

"They smell good enough," Irene said. "And I do have an appetite. The Stockton air is working already."

Ellen Wentworth was a good cook and Irene enjoyed everything at dinner from the tomato juice with just the right seasoning of lemon to the tempting frozen fruit ice cream that was the dessert. After dinner Ellen insisted she and Clyde sit out back on the patio while she cleaned up in the kitchen. In a short time she joined them and sinking into one of the wicker chairs said: "We don't always go to the hospital in the evenings. It's upsetting to the kiddies, especially the very young ones like Annie. So I go in the afternoons and Clyde visits during his lunch hour."

Clyde, who was smoking his after-dinner pipe, nodded. "Annie will be coming home in a few days. Better introduce yourself tomorrow when you see her."

"I'll do that," Irene promised.

Ellen regarded her with admiring eyes. "I'm very fond of your dress. You can

tell that's from a New York 'specialty shop."

"It is actually," Irene admitted. "But a very modest shop. All their dresses are in the lower price range."

"You can't get them like that here at any price," Ellen said. "I do a lot of our shopping in Hartford. I've found some good stores there."

Clyde Wentworth smiled in Irene's direction. "What brought you here from the big town anyway?"

She knew she was blushing. It would be difficult to explain her main reason. Instead she settled for the secondary one. "I was working for a very demanding man," she said. "Dr. Ralph Grant gave me an offer to join him here. So I accepted."

"I see." The young engineer nodded, apparently innocent that he had caused her some embarrassment. "You knew him before he came here?"

"That's right. I worked in the clinic with his uncle in New York. Of course Ralph was associated with him too, until he came here."

Clyde showed interest. "Well, that makes it nice. I mean, you being old friends."

"Clyde!" Ellen gave him a look of amused annoyance. "You're awful! Grilling Irene like that and making insinuations!"

He sat forward and removed the slim pipe from his mouth. "Insinuations? Who made any insinuations?"

His wife gave Irene a smile and raised her hands in a hopeless gesture. "I tell you he's a case," she said. "He does naturally what most female gossips do with deliberate malice."

"I don't mind," Irene laughed.

"You women and your double talk!" Clyde relaxed in his chair again and dragged unhappily at the pipe. "I was just asking a few questions!"

"And asking, and asking and asking!" Ellen reprimanded him in her easy way. "Isn't it almost time for Nils to show up?"

At that her husband brightened and studied his wrist watch. "It's only about eight," he said. "He usually comes about eight-thirty."

"You'll like him," Ellen promised Irene.

She raised her eyebrows. "Is he a neighbour of yours?"

"No," the engineer's wife said. "We've only met him this summer. He's one of Dr. Lederer's patients. He's having some involved work done. It means a series

of operations. So he rented a house near here for six months."

"You must have heard of him," Clyde said. "Nils Pallin, the concert violinist."

Irene nodded. "Yes. I've seen him on television. I think Ed Sullivan used him once. And I know he's given concerts at Carnegie Hall."

"He's given them all over the world," the engineer said. "He's one of the big talents. Too bad about his hand."

"He injured his hand?" Irene asked, her interest growing. She remembered the Danish violinist as tall and very slender with a mop of curly dark hair.

"Both hands," Ellen Wentworth told her. "A fire broke out in the living room of his apartment one night after he'd gone to bed. There'd been a party and someone had dropped a live cigarette behind a divan cushion. It smouldered there until late and then broke into flame. By the time Nils was awake there was quite a fire and the room was filled with smoke. He called the fire department on the phone and then remembered a portfolio of original compositions left with him by a composer friend. He knew they were the only copies and what it would mean if they were lost. So he groped his way through the smoke-filled room in an effort to find them. Of course he never did and if the firemen hadn't arrived in time he'd have lost his life. As it was they discovered him unconscious on the carpet with both his hands badly burned. His left one was in the worst shape."

"Doctor Grant has the right one all fixed up," her husband said, picking up the story. "And he's done three operations on the left hand already but it's still in bad shape. Nils doesn't say much but I think he's pretty discouraged."

"Can he use it to play at all?" Irene asked.

Ellen shook her head. "No. He hasn't touched his violin since the night of the fire. He hasn't enough control of that vital left hand to play."

"He hired a local woman to be his housekeeper," the engineer said. "And I guess he reads a lot. But he gets bored. We met him at the hospital when we first put Annie in and we've become pretty close friends."

His wife smiled proudly. "He comes by every single night."

"It seems that Stockton can be a pretty lively place after all," Irene said.

"And where could you get a nicer

evening than this?" Clyde Wentworth asked.

It was pleasant out on the patio. Sitting in the comfortable wicker chairs around the circular table with its gay umbrella covering of white and blue. The ground was paved with flagstone and a seven foot high white plywood fence in a weaved pattern gave them privacy from the neighbouring houses. As dusk settled a few mosquitos made their appearance.

Clyde gave his arm a hasty slap and grinned at Irene. "I have the remedy for those hungry little animals." And he got up and touched a match to each of four torch lamps on slender poles mounted at the corners of the patio. The dark of the late August night was at hand and the licking flames made a pretty picture and gave off a nose-tingling pleasant odour that dispelled the invasion of insects. They'd settled down to more easy conversation when a car drove up and parked in front of the house.

Clyde jumped up. "I'll go out and meet him," he said and left them.

Only a couple of minutes later he came back with the tall, familiar figure of Nils Pallin rather shyly accompanying him. The violinist wore a light suit of some sort of nylon fabric and Irene noticed at once that he looked slightly older than when she'd seen him on television and he was greying at the temples. He must be at least forty-five.

With a show of pride, Clyde made the introductions and Nils Pallin took a seat at the table with them. He smiled at Irene. "I heard we were going to have a new nurse at the clinic. But I hardly expected one so beautiful!"

Irene laughed. "And I hardly expected such a compliment from a musician. I had no idea you were so versed in flattery."

He raised a protesting hand, and she noticed that this one, the right, was seemingly restored to normal. "You are wrong about musicians. We do not indulge in flattery at all," he said. "Our forte is truth. I am very serious."

"Thank you anyway," she said. Without appearing to stare she managed to check on his left hand which he kept discreetly hidden on the chair beside him. She caught just the glimpe of the bandage on it.

"The hospital is going to be a busy place," Nils Pallin smiled. "We are to be

favoured with a famous patient. I understand he's coming the day after tomorrow. You probably have seen him on the screen dozens of times, Barry Mann."

Ellen Wentworth rolled her eyes in a gesture of mock delight. "He's my favourite comedian. They call him the screen's most enduring leading man."

"Apparently a bit of the endurance has worn off," Nils said. "He's going to have his face lifted. At least, that's what Dr. Grant told me."

"I'm glad Annie's going to be there a day or two longer," the engineer's wife said excitedly. "I'll make some excuse to talk to Barry Mann and try and get his autograph."

Her husband gave her an exasperated look. "If Annie is okay tomorrow she is coming home tomorrow. I'm not going to let her stay in hospital an extra day just so you can get some phony film star's autograph!"

"Well, I like that!" Ellen said.

"The ladies will be flocking to Stockton Memorial when the word gets around," Nils said. "Ellen will be just one of the many."

"I like his acting," Irene said. "He's very funny and yet he has a rather quiet personality. You never hear much about him off-screen, except of course when he's getting a divorce."

Clyde Wentworth looked disgusted. "And that's happened three times that I can remember. There was the princess, the heiress, and just lately the actress."

Ellen looked at Nils with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "You're famous, Nils. But you're way behind Barry Mann on wives. What's wrong?"

The slender man laughed. "I'm afraid I have not made an income to match Mr. Mann's and so I cannot indulge his hobby. In any case I have enjoyed my bachelor state."

Clyde nodded agreement. "You're right. Keep the kind of housekeepers you can dismiss at the end of the week."

His wife looked at him with a comic glare and gave a squeal of annoyance. "I think you're hateful!"

Nils turned to Irene and said: "Have you driven around our town yet?"

"Not a great deal," she said. "On the bus coming in and Dr. Grant brought me over from the bus station."

"You've seen only a little of it then," he said. "Why not come for a short drive now? It's a lovely night and I'm feeling somewhat restless."

Irene was surprised at the suddenness

of his invitation. But she was also pleased. While she had enjoyed it on the patio with the Wentworths she felt that perhaps she was intruding too much on her first night with them. Surely they'd appreciate a little private time to themselves. She glanced at Ellen and her husband and said: "Would you mind?"

They both exclaimed: "No!" Then they exchanged embarrassed looks and smiles.

Ellen said, "I think it is a lovely idea. You'll enjoy the drive and Nils will have fun showing you the high spots of Stockton after dark."

"Except for the Civil War Memorial that is floodlit and the hotel cocktail lounge I can't think of anything else," Clyde considered.

"There are lots of places," Ellen disagreed. "There's the summer theatre at Sharon, only a few miles away, and plenty of good restaurants."

By this time both Nils and Irene were on their feet. "I've had the urge to do some driving all day," the violinist said. "But I was at the hospital all morning and this afternoon it was too warm."

Irene went to her room and picked up a light sweater at Ellen's insistence and a few minutes later she and Nils Pallin took off in his sporty blue convertible. It was an unexpected turn of events for her and she couldn't help wondering what sort of person the violinist really was. He had a certain preciseness to his speech that marked his foreign birth but otherwise he seemed very casual and friendly and without any sign of a celebrity complex.

They drove first to the small part in front of the city hall and Nils brought the car to a stop with its motor still running. He indicated the flood-lit Civil War Statue of a foot soldier with a musket in his hand. "There, at least, is one of the attractions Clyde mentioned," he said with a smile.

"I think most New England towns have one," Irene said.

"Probably," Nils agreed. "And now we'll drive on to the other end of Main Street and the Stockton Hotel."

"According to Clyde that's the second and only night attraction," Irene laughed.

"And it's a very modest establishment. At least by my standards," Nils gave her a look as he drove along the darkened street. "I have an idea. Why not stop at my place? It's only a couple of blocks from here and I have plenty of everything to eat or drink there. I don't enjoy

public places much these days. Too many people stare." As he said this he lifted up his bandaged hand for her to see and she realized for the first time that he'd been operating the car with his right hand only.

She hesitated. "It's quite late. Perhaps you'd better drive me home instead. I have a heavy day tomorrow and I'm not at all hungry."

He gave her another quick pleading glance. "Just for a half-hour, then. I promise you won't be compromised. My housekeeper lives in the house with me. She never goes to bed until midnight at the earliest. So we will have an ideal chaperon."

Irene smiled. "Well, just for a half-hour then. It wasn't the lack of a chaperon that worried me. It's just that I don't want to be out late."

The house that Nils Pallin had rented proved to be very old and well built in the colonial style so popular in New England. It was red brick with gracious white front door and windows with white frames and shutters. The owners were in Europe for an extended stay and had rented the place to the violinist completely furnished. It was the property of one of the town's oldest families and the interior of the house reflected their good taste in its simple elegance.

Nils ushered her into the big living room with its ornate nineteenth-century furniture and many antique pieces. At the far end was a huge fireplace with several comfortable looking chairs set suitably before it. He led her to one of these with a proud smile.

"This is the corner I like best," he said. "It's nicely remote and peaceful. I haven't had any need to use the fireplace yet. But the owners have thoughtfully provided me with an intriguing false fire that gives me pleasure without warmth." He knelt before it and turned on a switch. The immediate result was a life-like electric replica of a burning log lighting. He looked up at her with a boyish delight showing on his usually solemn face. "You like it?"

"Marvellous!" Irene exclaimed. "It brings the entire room alive."

"I think so," he agreed and got up and went across to the overhead chandelier switch and turned it off. Now all the light in the room came from the log in the fireplace. It cast its ruddy glow over everything like a magic spell. Irene sank back in her chair and sighed happily as she studied the lines of an antique table

with a shining vase on it and a heavily framed print on the wall above it, all highlighted by the fireplace's flickering red glow.

"I've often dreamed of being in a place like this," she said. "But I've never found one until now."

"The agents wanted more rental that I planned to pay," Nils told her. "But I couldn't argue. Once I saw it I had to have it." He went to the doorway that led to the rest of the house. "If you'll excuse me a moment I'll have my housekeeper fix us up a tray."

A little later over a silver tray of tasty food and drink, prepared by the housekeeper in a surprisingly short time, their talk took on an intimate tone.

"When I first came here I thought it was part of a dreadful experience," Nils confessed to her. "Now I am no longer so sure. What happened to me was terrible enough and I may never be able to resume my career. But maybe I have learned something through all this."

"What do they think about your hand at the hospital?" Irene asked.

He shrugged. "They are hopeful. But then Dr. Lederer is the epitome of optimism and his entire staff reflects it. He's a remarkable old man. Have you met him yet?"

"No," she said. "I'll be doing that in the morning."

"You'll be impressed." Nils Pallin's fine features took on a thoughtful cast. "Perhaps he has had more to do with my changed way of thinking than anything or anyone else. He has taught me what courage means."

"You were a brilliant violinist," she said. "I'm sure you will be again."

He stared into the fireplace, his patrician face outlined in the flickering glow. And it struck Irene that they might have been people living in some distant more peaceful era, surrounded as they were by the quiet antiquity of the old room. There was a long moment of silence between them.

Then Nils spoke without looking at her. "Before I came here, when I thought I would never play again I tried twice to end my life by taking sleeping tablets. The first time I didn't take enough and the second attempt was spoiled when a friend found me and had me rushed to a hospital. So I arrived in Stockholm in a pretty desperate state."

"I can understand what losing your music would mean to you," Irene told him quietly.

Now he glanced at her with a weary smile. "But I wasn't losing my music. I had lost something much more basic. My courage to face life. Perhaps I had never really had much of this quality." His solemn eyes met hers. "But I am thankful to have found it here."

"Then you made no mistake in coming?"

"No," he agreed with a small sigh as he glanced down at his bandaged left hand, "I made no mistake in coming. Regardless of how the operations turn out I will always have my music now."

Irene said, "I'm not sure I understand."

"Simple!" He smiled at her. "I still have my knowledge of music. All I need do is adapt it to some other channel. I have thought that I might like to conduct. There is no reason why I shouldn't if I wish. And then there's the field of composition. Even in this age of electronics when a performer's art can be recorded and passed on to posterity a performer's immortality is very dubious. Variations in technique and changes in interpretation soon make any performer's work dated. But the composer, the creator of worthwhile music, can live on through the ages. Isn't that a goal to excite a man?" His voice rose with enthusiasm as he finished the speech.

It was her turn to smile. "Then you will go on after you leave here. No matter how it turns out?"

"Yes," he said. "I will go on. Because now I have the courage."

"You must have always had it without realizing," Irene said. "Otherwise you wouldn't have so quickly adapted Dr. Lederer's philosophy."

He shook his head. "Remember that I took sleeping tablets twice."

"You were very ill then."

"I know," he agreed. "But I wonder if that illness isn't a part of all our living today. Our pace is so chaotic and we're all so worried about failures, that in the end aren't really of any basic importance." He stared at the fireplace again. "I was always in a frenzy about my career. Most of the time I failed to find true enjoyment in my music as I had in the beginning. Even before my hands were damaged my inner content had been destroyed. When disaster came I had nothing to fall back on. No inner resources to fight it."

"Many of us are in the same fix these days," Irene stared down at her hands.

"Most of us," he corrected her. "And somehow people have got to win back

the qualittion we've lost in our confused ago. It would be nice to think we could see it happen without personal or national disaster." He looked across at her. "No now you know how I came here and what it is doing for me. Why have you come?"

The question was put to her so directly that for a moment she hesitated in finding a proper answer. At last she gave him a faint smile and said, "I think that maybe I'm running away from something on the outside, too. And that perhaps I hoped that here I might also find myself. The sort of person I am and what I want to do with my life from here on."

He nodded. "I think you've come to the right place."

"I hope so." She said it quietly and with great sincerity.

He glanced at his watch and then smiled at her. "The half-hour I'm afraid has grown into more than twice that long. I'd better get you straight home or we'll have scandalized the Wentworths on your first night with them."

She stood hurriedly. "I had no idea the time had gone so quickly. Anyway I'm not worried about the Wentworths. They're very nice."

"I most heartily concur," he said with the precise accent she found so charming.

At the door of the Wentworth house he stood with her for a moment under the overhead light which they'd left on for her return. "I hope we can do more of this," he said, looking down at her with a radiant smile. "It's been a lovely evening."

"Thank you," she said. "I enjoyed every moment of it. I'll likely be seeing you at the hospital."

"Without question," he agreed. And then slowly and with a certain gravity he drew her close to him and touched his lips gently to her cheek. Releasing her he said: "You're a very lovely child."

It was a moment of blushing confusion for her and before she could find a suitable reply he'd nodded and started back to his car. She watched him drive off and then went into the darkened hallway.

She could still feel the trace of his lips on her cheek. Unconsciously she reached up and touched her fingers to the spot as she stood there in the quiet shadows. Events had happened at a rapid pace since her arrival in the small Connecticut town. Already her years in New York seemed a part of her past even

though she'd left there less than twenty-four hours ago. But of course that was an illusion. When she'd had time to adjust to this new life her past would come into proper perspective. She wondered just how this would come about. And if Dr. Max Marshall would get his divorce and bridge the gap between the two phases of her life by coming to Stockton to renew his courtship of her.

The next morning Clyde Wentworth dropped Irene off at the Stockton Memorial Hospital on his way to work. It was a cool bright morning as she made her way up the broad granite stairs of the front entrance with the promise of another warm summer day. Inside she found herself in a bright lobby with a circular information desk directly ahead of her and next to the double elevator doors.

She went over to the girl at the desk who also served as telephone operator since she was wearing the familiar headphones. The operator glanced from her switchboard to Irene with a friendly smile. "Something I can help you with?" she asked.

"I'm looking for Dr. Grant," she said.

The woman nodded in the direction of the elevators. "First floor up and second door to your right. I think he's in his office now."

Irene thanked her and took the first elevator and pressed the proper buttons. Stockton Memorial with its bright lobby, helpful receptionist and self service elevators gave one the impression that it was run on modern, efficient lines.

She found herself feeling as she had when she was a student nurse beginning her first day in hospital. She was excited and even a little fearful. Here she would have new problems to meet, new routines to learn and she hoped she wouldn't be a disappointment to Dr. Ralph Grant.

The corridor on the second floor was empty and quiet as she got off the elevator and made her way down to the office the receptionist had mentioned. Its door was open and Ralph Grant was sitting at his desk writing. Hearing her he looked up with a smile on his boyish, intelligent face. He was wearing a grey suit that set off his sandy complexion and looked almost handsome.

"He got up and waved her to a chair. "Well, you're right on time, Miss Hall."

"Yes, Clyde Wentworth drove me over," she said. She noted that he

addressed her formally as he always did at the hospital.

He indicated his desk. "These forms pile up on me. Then the day of reckoning arrives and I simply have to take care of them. I try to meet the problem by finishing a few each morning before the routine of the day begins."

"I can sympathize with you," Irene said. "It seemed we had more forms to complete every week at Manhattan General. I sometimes stayed after my shift was finished to get mine done."

"You'll be faced with some of that here," Dr. Grant warned her. "Although we do have a rather different system." He stood up again. "Now I may as well show you around."

She went down a long corridor with him that led to the wing in which the Plastic Surgery clinic was set up. The central floor desk reminded her a lot of the one at Manhattan General. As they approached it a young girl with a pretty round face and brown hair cut in a boyish Lord Byron style looked up at them.

Irene's first impression of the girl was that she was intelligent and also extremely nervous. She had large brown eyes with lovely lashes but even they took on an uneasy light as she rose to greet them.

Ralph Grant quickly took care of introductions in his easy professional way. The girl's name was Blanche Fisher and she was staying on a few days until Irene became familiar with the floor and then she was transferring to general duty on another floor.

She gave Irene an anxious smile. "I've had a lot of experience taking care of post-op patients and they want me on the general surgery floor."

"I'll try not to be too stupid," Irene said. "But it's bound to be a while before I'm sure of myself."

"With all your New York experience!" Blanche Fisher exclaimed in awed doubt.

"New York is not much different from anywhere else as far as nursing is concerned," Irene smiled. "It is just as easy and just as difficult as in any modern hospital."

"Agreed," Ralph Grant nodded. "I'll let you two get acquainted while I make a few phone calls and then I'll take you on a round of the patients with me."

After he left them Blanche Fisher said, "You've worked with Dr. Grant in New York I understand."

"Yes," Irene said. "For quite a long time."

The girl gave one of her nervous smiles. "I wonder they let him go. He's the mainspring of things here. Not that Dr. Lederer isn't marvellous, but he is old and couldn't possibly manage alone. Dr. Grant worked with his uncle in New York, didn't he? It seems strange he didn't stay on there."

Watching the girl it was impossible to be sure whether she was just making a rambling effort at conversation or if she might be craftily probing to find out more about some rumours she'd heard.

Irene said, "I think there was a personality conflict between them." Of course this was a truthful answer but it also avoided going into the real problems any deeper. Not that even she knew all about them.

Blanche Fisher nodded and sat down at her desk again. "I think Dr. Grant is outstanding as a doctor and a person as well." She glanced up at Irene with a furtive smile. At the same time her hand on the desk nervously twisted a pencil.

It came to Irene with a sudden flash. This girl was interested in Ralph Grant and she was frightened at her entering the picture. It was completely clear to her now that she guessed the nervous girl's secret.

She said, "You know him quite well then? I mean you've been with him socially outside the hospital?"

Blanche turned scarlet and glanced down. "Oh, yes! We've gone out different places together."

"How nice," Irene said trying to sound pleased and sincere at the same time. She wanted to put the girl at ease since they'd be working together. And in any case she'd only known Ralph in the most casual way and so couldn't possibly see herself as a rival for his affections.

Their conversation then passed on to hospital affairs and after several minutes of this Irene went to the dressing room and changed into her uniform. By the time she returned Ralph Grant, who had meanwhile donned his own white smock, was waiting at the desk for her.

Together they made visits to all the patients. There were several post-surgery cases having facial restorations and the usual quota of nasal and face-lifting patients. There were also two patients having aesthetic surgery on their bodies. And then there were the children's cases, three in all. Two of them with slight congenital deformities of the lip and Annie Wentworth who'd so recently

had a graft on her cheek to cover the ugly purple birthmark that distorted this side of her face.

The four-year-old's bright green room was typical of most of the others. She was a lovely child as Irene had been told and when they went into the room they'd found her sitting up in bed with a golden-haired doll almost the size of herself folded tightly in her arms. She eyed the intruders with solemn interest.

Irene introduced herself and said, "I know your mama and daddy."

Annie looked up at her doubtfully to answer, "Daddy comes at noon."

"I know," she smiled with a side glance at Ralph Grant. "Your daddy will be taking you home soon." She could see that this was true as the face was well-healed and the operation scars showed only in thin white lines that would shortly vanish. They left the youngster still absorbed in the care of her doll and went out into the corridor to stroll slowly back to the desk.

Ralph said, "Now you've seen our present lot. Of course they come and go almost every day. We have Barry Mann coming in shortly."

"So I've heard," she said.

Ralph laughed. "That news is spreading quickly. And then there are several patients who come in for treatment and are sometimes hospitalized for short periods at a time. The violinist, Nils Pallin, is one of them. He's rented a house here in Stockton."

"I knew that too," Irene said with a smile. "I met him last night."

The young surgeon's eyebrows raised in astonishment. "It seems to me you're very well briefed for someone who's only arrived in the town less than a day ago."

"Purely coincidence," she explained. "He's a friend of the Wentworths. I met him there last night."

Ralph paused at the central desk. "Nils is a fine fellow. He's had a hard time with those hands. We've two more operations scheduled on the left one. Then he'll know if he'll play again."

"I think he's facing his problem wonderfully," Irene said.

He nodded. "I agree." Then with a smile that included both she and Blanche Fisher he said: "I'm going back to my office. I'll leave things in your capable hands."

After he'd gone the nurse with the lovely brown eyes cleared her throat nervously. "I heard you mentioning

Nils Pallin, the violinist," she said. "Have you met him?"

"Last night for the first time. He's very nice."

Blanche smiled nervously. "Yes, I think so too. We have him as a patient and Ralph—Dr. Grant—has taken me to his home several times. Isn't it a lovely old place?"

"Yes, it is," Irene agreed. So Blanche and Ralph had been to visit Nils several times. Apparently it was true that they'd been seeing a lot of each other outside hospital hours.

The rest of the morning was a busy one. Irene met several of the other doctors on the staff who came to visit their patients for treatment of problems other than those of plastic surgery. Most of them were easy-going, middle-aged men who had a private practice in Stockton or some of the surrounding towns. She was impressed with Dr. Frank Sturgeon, the anaesthetist, who came by and spent quite a long while talking to her. It turned out that he was deeply interested in plastic surgery. He was a stout man with a bald head and horn-rimmed glasses.

"What about pinch grafts?" he wanted to know. "Do you use them at Manhattan General? We've done away with them here except for small areas, maybe an eyelid or something of the sort."

Irene knew that by pinch grafts he was referring to small pieces of superficial skin layer averaging about one-quarter inch in diameter, a dozen or so of which were often taken from one area and placed at spaced intervals as small islands in the recipient site. There they would grow and spread out to fully cover the bare area.

She shook her head. "We didn't use them much at Manhattan General either. We've replaced them with split-thickness grafts. They are the best for covering large burned areas."

"We haven't treated any recent bad burn cases," the anaesthetist said. "I don't count Nils Pallin as he's come to us after initial treatment somewhere else. His is a rehabilitation case as far as Dr. Grant is concerned. Well, nice meeting you, Miss Hall." And with that he went on his way.

Lunch hour was a hurried affair. She took only a sandwich and milk and sat at a table with two nurses from the maternity ward who spent the entire time comparing notes about their boy



"Look at me, my face is a swollen mess, and I have awful yellowish rings under my eyes."

friends. She didn't see any familiar faces in the small cafeteria, except one of the doctors who'd made a morning call on the floor.

About an hour after she rejoined Blanche Fisher at the desk she was called to the room of one of the face-lifting cases. The patient was a woman of middle-age with a whining, querulous voice of a much older person.

"I'm not comfortable," she complained as Irene entered her room.

Irene had been in earlier and fixed the venetian blinds so the sun would not shine in to bother her. She cast a quick glance in their direction now and saw that they were still all right.

She said, "The sun can't be bothering you, Mrs. Duffy. I fixed the blinds last time I was in."

The thin woman on the bed gave her an annoyed look. "Who said it was the sun? It's my face! I think the doctor's done something wrong."

"What makes you think so?" Irene asked patiently.

"Look at me!" Mrs. Duffy cried. "My face is a swollen mess and I have awful

yellowish rings under my eyes. My husband will make him accountable if he had harmed me in any way. Mr. Duffy has a lot of influence and he was against me having my face lifted in the first place."

Irene answered her mildly. "I'm certain Mr. Duffy will feel differently when he sees the improvement the operation has made."

"Improvement?" Mrs. Duffy asked incredulously. "Look at my eyes! Anyone would think they belonged to a Russian rabbit!"

"Perhaps you've had excessive bleeding during the operation," Irene explained. "That often brings on conjunctival discoloration but it doesn't mean the doctor has made an error or you're in any kind of trouble. It will clear up with treatment."

"In how long?" Mrs. Duffy asked dismally.

"A fortnight at most," she said.

"A fortnight!" The querulous voice howled the words. "Mr. Duffy is coming to see me tomorrow evening." She lay back on her pillow and moaned.

"Don't upset yourself," Irene told her.

"I'll explain your problem to Dr. Grant and he'll see you're looking well enough not to disturb your husband."

The woman was still complaining when she left her to go back to the desk. Ralph Grant was chatting with Dr. Sturgeon when she got there and wheeled around to her with a smile.

"You look worried. What's wrong?" he asked.

She told him. Finishing with, "I'm afraid that woman is delaying her recovery by keeping her nerves in this state."

He shook his head. "She's been one of our problems since she came in. I'll talk to her. But before I do that I want to take you outside to meet Dr. Lederer."

Irene smiled. "I've been looking forward to that."

"He's spending quite a lot of his time these days writing a new book on some of his operative techniques. Days that are fine like this he works out on the lawn behind the hospital where we have a fairly large recreational area for patients."

They took the elevator to the ground floor of the hospital and then went out the back steps to the rolling expanse of green lawn and trees that was located directly behind the buildings. There were many benches out there and a shuffleboard and croquet area. Some patients were out there in wheelchairs accompanied by their nurses. It was an ideal extra that only a hospital as fortunately located as the Stockton Memorial could offer its patients.

Ralph strode quickly across the lawn in the direction of a giant elm tree. Underneath it Irene saw an elderly man sitting in a chair writing. Beside him there was a small table with books stacked on it and he held his writing pad on his lap. On the other side of the chair, stretched out on the grass close to him, was an enormous Old English Sheepdog. He was a pretty grey-blue and white with long fluffy hair covering his entire body and head so that not even his eyes were visible, just a round black nose jutting out from his untidy mop of a head.

Ralph smiled. "You're looking at the dog. You must have seen them before. Walt Disney used one in a couple of his shaggy dog movies and you see them in a lot of advertisements these days."

"I know," Irene said.

Now they were close to the old man in the chair and he looked up at them.

He was a gaunt, tall person who commanded great dignity. He studied Irene from under bushy white brows that matched his mane of hair. His sharp blue eyes looked her up and down before the lantern-jaw opened and he said, "So this is your new Miss Hall?"

"The same, sir," Ralph Grant said. "She's been looking forward to meeting you."

"It is my pleasure," the old man said, his blue eyes twinkling. "Not too many pretty girls in this place as you may have noticed. And please forgive me for not rising. This is one of the days when my arthritis dictates my manners."

She smiled. "It's wonderful to meet someone who's a legend in the profession."

He raised a protesting hand and she saw that it was terribly twisted and knotted from his arthritic condition. "Don't tag me a legend yet," he said. "I trust I'm still part of the present and at least a bit of the future as well."

"Miss Hall was admiring Rufus." Ralph smiled.

Dr. Lederer glanced down at the elderly sheepdog who had been studying Irene with eyes concealed behind the mop of hair. The old doctor chuckled and gently stroked the dog's head. "Rufus, like myself, is well past retirement. But he insists on looking after me as best he can. In the old days he'd have run half-way to the hospital to meet you but now he walks with as much difficulty as I do. He shares everything with me even my arthritis." Rufus confirmed this statement with a wide yawn followed by an indefinite whimpering sound from deep down his cavernous throat.

Ralph said. "We're having a little trouble with Mrs. Duffy. I think I'd best get back to her. I'll leave you three to get acquainted. That is, if you're not too busy, sir."

Dr. Lederer chuckled. "I'm not too busy. And tell Mrs. Duffy from me she's lucky we accepted her at the clinic. It's spoiled patients like her that give plastic surgery a bad name."

After Ralph started back to the hospital Irene knelt by Rufus and patted him. He acknowledged the attention by panting feverishly and deftly licking her hand with an enormous pink tongue. But he still made no effort to move from his comfortable stretched out position.

Dr. Lederer hunched around in his chair. "Perhaps we should move to a bench. I can't keep you standing all the while we talk."

"That's no problem," Irene promised with a smile and promptly sat down on the grass beside Rufus and arranged her skirt about her bent knees.

"Now I like that," the old man said delightedly. "I never stand on ceremony myself. I want the people around me to act natural as well. So you were with Ralph's uncle at the Manhattan General?"

"Yes. In fact I even spent my student training days there as well."

"You were lucky." Dr. Lederer clumped his gnarled hands and leaned forward in his chair like an ancient eagle. "It's a fine institution. And barring a bad personality they have a good chief of plastic surgery. Cabell Grant is a competent man."

"I realize that," she agreed, absently stroking Rufus who had settled his head on a paw.

"Made a bad mistake in falling out with Ralph. That boy is brilliant! I was glad to get him." He stared down at his hands grimly. "These old hands don't sculpt much these days. I usually average an operation a week and that's not bad for an old fellow eighty years old. But I needed an assistant badly. I've found an ideal one in Ralph."

"We all liked him at Manhattan General," Irene agreed.

The old man nodded. "So now you've come to join us. You're really interested in our speciality?"

"I've worked with plastic surgeons since I graduated," she said. "I prefer it to anything else."

The old man smiled. "I made up my mind early too. Just a young doctor wet behind the ears when I delivered a baby one night with a hare lip. I took one look at that little fellow crying with his deformed face and I knew that I wanted to help him above all else. To at least give him the break in life that every one else got routinely, to look like a normal human being. That night decided me to become a plastic surgeon."

"So many people misunderstand the purpose of our work," Irene said, caressing one of Rufus' silken ears. "They think it concerns the Mrs. Duffys and they are completely ignorant of the true services a plastic surgeon performs."

The gaunt old doctor stared out across the green lawn. "In all the years I've practised I've devoted a major portion of my time to the damaged and deformed. Repairing the ravages of age

has only been a minor part of my work and it has interested me least."

"It's different when people like actors whose livelihood depends on their appearance have their faces lifted," Irene said. "But I can't find much sympathy for many of the cases I've seen."

"There's a good argument for a man or woman making the best of their appearance in whatever way they wish and can afford to," Dr. Lederer said, looking down at her. "But many of them are responsible for their ravaged faces in the first place. It's not age alone that destroys their appearance. Leonardo da Vinci said centuries ago that when a man is past forty years of age he is responsible for the head he has. And I can vouch to its truth. I can almost tag them when they come into the office. Sometimes I feel like calling them Mr. Greed or Mr. Lust, or Miss Avarice. It's written that plainly in their faces."

"Then you think that people's minds really shape their looks?"

He nodded grimly. "The inner thoughts make the exterior lines. Plastic surgery may be the youngest of the many branches of the surgical art but it springs from basic and ancient roots. The Fount of Youth is part of the oldest legends. To it we've added the healing of deformities and the restoration of beauty. I've given my life to it and I have no regrets."

"I'm staying with the Wentworths," Irene told him. "They're very grateful for what you've done for their little girl."

The old surgeon chuckled. "Well, we can afford to put up with a few Mrs. Duffys if it allows us to help one Annie Wentworth." He gave Irene another searching look. "There's nothing in your face you need be ashamed of young lady. Keep it that way."

Irene laughed a little. "I'll try."

The old man glanced down at Rufus who had laid his great head against her hand in a gesture of perfect relaxation. "Rufus approves of you and that's an excellent sign. We're both old bachelors and a bit crusty with the opposite sex."

Irene got to her feet. "I really mustn't hold you back from your work any longer."

He smiled. "That's all right, child. I've enjoyed this few minutes and so has Rufus. Do you like it here?"

She looked at the ivy-clad hospital buildings and the neat green lawns and then turned to the old surgeon. "I think it's an ideal place for a hospital."

"Then we agree," he said. "I will enjoy working with you, Miss Hall."

She said goodbye to Rufus who lifted his head and took on such a dejected air at her leaving that she felt sorry for him.

It was almost time to end her shift when she got back to the desk. The relief nurse, a tall bony woman with a hearty voice, had already made her appearance.

She greeted Irene with a wide smile on her tanned plain face. "I'm Mrs. Morris," she said. "Just call me Mary. How do you like our country hospital?"

"It's a bit more than that," Irene said. "I think I'm going to be very happy here."

She and Blanche Fisher changed from their uniforms and took the elevator downstairs together. The brown-eyed girl chatted almost continually in her same nervous manner. Irene realized that she must be a terribly insecure person and tried hard to be friendly with her.

She was presented with an embarrassing situation when Ralph Grant came forward to them as they got off the elevator in the lobby. He smiled at Irene.

"I have a call to make down town," he said. "I thought I'd wait and let you off on the way."

Involuntarily she glanced at Blanche and saw her face take on a sudden pinched expression. To make the best of an awkward moment she told Ralph: "Thanks. Perhaps we can drop off Blanche as well."

Blanche immediately protested. "That's not necessary. I only live a house or two away in the opposite direction. It would be just a needless nuisance."

Ralph gave the brown-eyed girl a friendly smile. "I'd be glad to do it."

"No, thanks, really!" Blanche said.

Irene felt guilty. She knew that Blanche was fond of Ralph Grant and must have hopes that he cared for her. She hated being involved in their affairs this way especially as she didn't really know the true situation. She decided she must somehow avoid anything like this happening again.

As they drove along the highway toward the Wentworths and Stockton Ralph said: "I was sorry that I was tied up last night. I'd like to have a good old gossip about things at Manhattan General."

She found herself wary. It was a perfectly natural thing that he should feel like this and that they should have a talk together. But she'd prefer to postpone it until she'd had a chance to assure Blanche there was nothing to worry about.

Almost immediately he asked the question she didn't want to hear. "How about us going out somewhere for a bit tonight?"

There was only one thing she could do. With a small smile she said: "I'm not sure that I should. Blanche has been telling me that you're good friends. And I'm afraid we may have upset her just now. Do you think seeing each other tonight would be fair to her?"

Ralph Grant gave her an astounded glance. "She must have given you some very wrong ideas. We are good friends and no more than that. So how about tonight?"

CHAPTER FOUR

IRENE thought quickly. Probably she was being absurd in her undue concern for Blanche Fisher. After all she and Ralph had been friends for a long time and before he ever came to Stockton and met the brown-eyed girl. Also Ralph was very honourable in this sort of thing. If he said there was nothing but a casual friendship between he and Blanche she would be willing to gamble that he was telling the truth.

Finally she answered. "All right. What time?"

"Suppose we make an evening of it," he said. "I'll pick you up about eight."

And so it was settled. She found the Wentworths in a happy state of mind about Annie's homecoming the following day. And at the dinner table they both gave good reports of the little girl's impression of Irene.

Clyde Wentworth's tanned, round face beamed across the table. "When I saw her at night she called you the pretty lady."

His wife picked up the story. "I saw

her later in the afternoon," she told Irene, "and when I said you were living with us she broke into a big smile."

"I'm glad she likes me," Irene said. "I was only with her a few minutes."

Ellen Wentworth laughed. "Annie is like her father. It doesn't take her long to make up her mind about a pretty face."

"Stop it, honey," Clyde pleaded. "You make me sound dangerous. First thing we'll have Irene scared and running off."

She laughed. "Don't worry about that. Where else could I possibly get such a lovely room?"

"By the way," Clyde said, "did you and Nils find any night life last night?"

She shook her head. "You catalogued the items pretty well. After we'd seen the Civil War monument we went over to his place and the housekeeper fixed us a lunch."

Ellen spoke with a dreamy-eyed expression. "Isn't he the most charming man you ever met?"

"Yes," Irene agreed. "I like him a great deal."

"I imagine he'll be coming by as usual tonight," Clyde said, helping himself to a second piece of cake.

"I have an engagement to go out," she said. "So I suppose I won't be seeing him. Tell him I had a wonderful time last night."

Afterwards she went to her room and began to dress for her date with Dr. Ralph Grant. After some consideration she decided on a stylish maroon dress that she'd picked up before she left New York. She'd bought quite a few dresses, enough to last her until she had found a place to buy clothes in Stockton. It often took several months to locate a store that suited you in a new area.

She decided to wear a brooch of siamese silver and the pendant ear-rings that matched them. It was as she was sitting in front of the mirror putting them on that she had second thoughts about going out with Ralph. She remembered his uncle's angry words to her before she left New York. "Ralph is a liar!" he had said.

What if she'd been wrong about him all along? Suppose he should turn out to conform to his uncle's picture of him rather than hers? He might have lied to her about his relationship with Blanche. The impression she got from the brown-eyed girl was that they were on the verge of becoming engaged. But Ralph had almost angrily denied that. Who was telling the truth?

It was hard to believe that the young surgeon was anything like his uncle painted him. And he had won the eminent Dr. Lederer over completely. In fact everyone she'd talked to had been emphatic in their good opinions of Ralph. So perhaps she was worrying herself needlessly. Very likely so.

She was disappointed at not being able to see Nils Pallin again when he made his nightly visit to the Wentworths. Ellen was right. The violinist was a charming and talented man. Of course he was quite a bit older than she but the variance in ages had not seemed to be a bar to their thoroughly enjoying themselves together. In their single meeting she had come to feel she'd known Nils for a long time and she wanted to see him again.

Soon after this Ralph arrived and they drove downtown. He was in a gay relaxed mood and she quickly put aside her fears concerning him. Within a short time they were at ease with each other as they had been back in New York.

He parked the car in the lot beside the Stockton Hotel and said, "This isn't the largest dining room in the country but they do serve good food and they have a small trio playing for dinner music and dancing every week night."

"What more could the Plaza offer us?" Irene said jokingly.

"At least a higher cover charge," Ralph said, picking up her mood. "They don't have any here."

The room turned out to be very nice. It was decorated in French Provincial style with murals of rural France and had pleasant subdued lighting. At one end of the room was a small stand on which the musicians were playing and in front of it a tiny hardwood area for dancing. The balance of the room was studded with numerous round tables with sparkling white cloths. Irene felt it was an excellent place for the size of the town.

There were only a few tables occupied and the waiter found them a spot not too far from the dance floor. Ralph had requested this and she knew that he liked to dance. After he had ordered for them they went out on the floor where there were already two other couples and danced through a medley of slow and fast foxtrots. The orchestra was not exceptional but they played a good steady dance beat.

Back at their table Ralph smiled. "This is like old times."

"I had no idea I'd find anything like this here," she said.

He lit a cigarette without offering her one as he knew she didn't smoke. "In the mid-summer there are a couple of other spots on the outskirts of town. And there's a summer playhouse in Sharon that's not bad but it's closed at this time of year. I had Blanche out there a couple of times." He said it easily without realizing the implication of it and then almost immediately afterward he took on a guilty look.

She passed it off casually, saying, "That was nice."

The young surgeon's face was now crimson. "I've been thinking of what you said this afternoon ever since. Blanche is an attractive girl and I've enjoyed her company since I've been here. I hope I haven't put us both in an awkward spot."

"I hope not," Irene said looking at him very directly. "Small towns are not like New York. It doesn't take much to start speculation and gossip."

He glanced down at his smoking cigarette. "So it seems."

"Blanche is an intelligent girl," Irene said. "I'm sure she's as aware of this as you are. Perhaps much more so since she's lived here all her life. So unless she was deliberately misled I'm sure she understands."

She hoped she had phrased this so he would see clearly what she meant. And if he had any guilt in the matter he could take steps to make amends. Somehow she felt it was a case of thoughtlessness on his part rather than anything else. Ralph had no experience of living in small towns.

He sighed. "I'm going to have a serious talk with her the first chance I get. I like her too well to cause her any unpleasantness. At the same time I can't help it if a few stupid gossips let their tongues clatter because they've seen us together a few places."

"It wouldn't be important in my case," Irene explained with a smile. "Since I'm an outlander like yourself they couldn't pry into my affairs as they can hers. They'll learn the lores of small town people after a while."

"I hope the experience isn't too painful," he said with a grimace. "I've been so absorbed with my work here I haven't given a thought to what people in the town might be saying about me. On my nights off, and they were few, I did what I felt like doing. It was the

perfectly natural thing to invite Blanche out since she is an associate."

"I agree," she said. And wanting to get off the subject she went on, "I liked Dr. Lederer. Both he and Rufus are wonderful. You share the same cottage, don't you?"

He nodded. "Yes. He has a Filipino manservant who's been with him for years. He looks after us and cooks as well. We have a very comfortable arrangement."

"I'm impressed by the work you're doing," she said. "Especially with the children and those accident cases. And Nils Pallin's hands."

"I don't know how that's going to turn out," Ralph said with a worried look. "It isn't too promising. I've already let him know that. Another operation or two will finish our work. After that it will be a question of whether he can train new muscles to take over the work of those that were destroyed. Sometimes it happens and just as often it doesn't."

"At least he's well adjusted mentally."

"Dr. Lederer did that," Ralph said. "He's a doctor in the best of traditions. A healer of the mind as well as the body."

"That's where he differs from your uncle," she said. "Cabell Grant is a genius with a scalpel but there is no heart to match his brilliance."

Ralph nodded his agreement. "It's interesting to hear you say that. I feel exactly the same way."

"He'll be jealous when he hears you're going to have Barry Mann as a patient," Irene said. "He likes to have the big names for himself."

"I imagine he'll make some comments," the young surgeon said bitterly. "In the last year and a half he's done all he can to hurt me."

"Haven't you tried to make some sort of peace with him?" she asked.

"No chance of that." Ralph's expression mirrored the grim resignation of his tone. "I've talked to him a few times. He's still polite and aloof. And behind my back he can't say anything bad enough."

"But why does he want to continue this feud between you?"

"He has his own good reasons," Ralph said with annoying vagueness. "What do you say about dancing again? That music is almost too good to waste."

They went out on the floor and there was no further conversation between them as they danced. She had an idea

he'd made the sudden suggestion because the talk had become embarrassing for him. Again, as she had before, she sensed there was a mystery behind the row with his uncle that Ralph didn't care to reveal. She wondered what it could be and what his reasons for this secrecy were.

Shortly before midnight they left the hotel and he drove her home. At the door they parked for a few minutes.

"It was good hearing about things in New York," he told her. They'd spent a major part of the night talking about mutual friends and associates at the Manhattan General.

"I enjoyed it too," she said.

He studied her in the semi-darkness of the car. "Before I had all that trouble back there," he said, "I felt that I had my life well ordered and that the only problems ahead were in my work. And those were challenges that I enjoyed. Then that crazy woman patient started trouble and it kept on snowballing. Since then I've had to try and build a new career."

"I realize it hasn't been easy."

His lips pressed tight in grim determination. "Nothing must upset me or my work here. It's taken too much time getting this foothold to lose it. At this stage in my life another delay would ruin any chances I might have to get anywhere in the profession, kill my opportunities to make any contributions."

Irene was amazed at this revelation of his concern. "I'm sure you don't have to worry. Dr. Lederer is very proud of you. He wouldn't think of letting you leave him now."

Ralph shook his head. "You can never be sure. I found that out at the Manhattan General. One incident and the entire picture can change. And now with one strike already against me it wouldn't take much. A single bad break and I'd be done professionally. Not even Lederer could save me." He paused. "That's why I'd just as soon Barry Mann had gone to Manhattan General for his operation. I'd rather have the publicity spotlight there than here. I'd prefer that someone else had the responsibility and the glory in his case."

"Aren't you talking defeatism?" She was shocked and alarmed at his thinking. "A few minutes ago you said you enjoyed the challenges of your work."

"I enjoyed them until everything crashed," he said. "Now I find I'm one

of the cautious majority. I'm learning to think my side of a risk out first."

"That doesn't always work in medicine," she pointed out. "You have to be prepared to take risks."

"So they say," he said with cynicism. "And you have to be also prepared to pay for taking them. In my position that doesn't seem like a sound gamble."

"Why do you suddenly talk this way?" she asked. "I thought you were glad to be here. That you were completely satisfied with the way things have turned out."

"I am glad to be here," he agreed. "But I'm not satisfied with the way things turned out. Do you think I should be happy that I was let out of Manhattan General in disgrace? That I have a decent spot in a good hospital only through the power and generosity of a fine old man? That I had to give up all serious ideas about you?"

She stared at him with raised eyebrows. "Ralph, what are you talking about?"

He leaned closer and his arm circled her. "Surely you knew that I was in love with you. I was at the point of asking you to marry me when everything crashed around me. Seeing you again has reminded me of how much I've lost!"

Irene shook her head. "If I'd known exactly how you felt I don't think I would have come here."

He looked away from her. "I'm sorry. I was crazy to tell you."

"No," she said softly and with understanding. "No, I don't think you were. But I do think you're badly mixed up. Why don't you discuss your feelings of insecurity with Dr. Lederer? I'm sure he could help you."

"No," he said tautly. "I've told him all I can. I can't risk letting him know how shaky I really am. He depends on me. He's an old man. It wouldn't be fair."

"Perhaps he understands you and your thinking more than you realize," she said. "He's a very smart man."

He turned to her again with a wry smile. "Probably you're right. He guesses a lot more than he lets on. I'm sorry I mentioned all this. I wanted it to be a good evening for you."

"It has been a good evening, Ralph," she said. "And I'm glad you've confided in me. I hope it may make things easier for you."

"Selfish of me to try and put some of my burden on you," he said. "But isn't that typical?"

Her eyes met his with a gentle consideration. "I don't think I'll suffer because you've told me you love me enough to consider asking me to marry you. Most girls would take that as a compliment. Should I make myself an exception?"

He was silent for a moment as he stared at her. "Do you think we could pick up where we left off? That there is still a chance for you and I?"

She gave a small laugh. "Why not?"

"I know that's what I wanted to hear," he said. And he drew her close to him as their lips met in a long kiss that spoke eloquently of their mutual love and need. They were lost to all else in this compulsive embrace. When they finally drew apart Irene regarded him with bright eyes that were suspiciously moist.

"This time you'll build strongly," she said. "There'll be no more setbacks. I'm sure of it."

"It has to be that way," he said. "Now that you're in it with me it won't be so hard to make myself believe it's possible."

They talked some more. Exchanged new confidences and dismissed old fears so that when they parted with a goodnight kiss Irene was certain that they had restored everything that had been between them and even gained something. There was a stronger bond in their new understanding of each other. And she realized that, even though it may have been subconscious, this was her true reason for coming to Stockton and the clinic. This reunion with Ralph.

But life was never so neatly plotted as fiction. And there were loose ends in both their lives that were still left dangling. She had got herself much more deeply involved with the young chest surgeon, Max Marshall, than she had intended. If it had not been for the discovery that he had a wife and the intervention of Betty Marshall she might have gone on with their romance. And even now he was still persisting. He had asked her to marry him as soon as he'd got his divorce. And Betty Marshall had made it plain she thought her husband was genuinely in love with her, otherwise she'd not have consented to the parting which she'd fought so long. Max would not expect to be forgotten by her so easily.

At the same time it seemed that Ralph had unwittingly bound himself to Blanche in the eyes of Stockton. Irene was certain that the brown-eyed girl had been sure he was serious. Being the type she was she'd no doubt protest this now.

But she would be deeply hurt. And it wasn't likely the sharp tongues of Stockton would skip the opportunity of relishing her misery.

For a long time Irene lay in bed with the small night lamp left on as she thought about these things. And almost directly her mind went back to the previous evening and the pleasant, peaceful time she'd spent with Nils Pallin. It had been perfect even to the goodnight kiss he'd so chastely placed on her cheek. Nils had also been faced with tragedy. But he'd found the inner resources to meet his problem. She hoped that Ralph would soon manage this as well.

She considered these three men she'd come to know and admire. Of them all it was Ralph who needed her most. Max might pretend desperation and say that her rejection would ruin his life. But he was the kind who would rebound when he met another pretty face. Not the first one perhaps, but soon there'd be some other girl that would catch his fancy. Nils Pallin had not even hinted that he was interested in her. But she could tell by his manner that he was. But Nils had his career and there was also his age to consider. He was a strong man again and she knew that the damage to his hands would only be a marking spot on the road to fame and not an end. Nils would never need her, nor anyone. But it was not like that with Ralph. Outwardly assured he was still racked by insecurity and he needed someone to share love and understanding with him. She'd always been fond of the quiet young surgeon and now, with the revelation of his love for her, she felt that perhaps they were right for each other. But deep within her a small voice of caution still echoed the many ugly things his uncle had said about him. And she worried that she might be confusing his need and her sympathy with love. Love that perhaps the brown-eyed Blanche might be able to give more honestly. With a troubled sigh she switched off the night light and tried to sleep.

The following morning the hospital hummed with excitement about the arrival of Barry Mann for his operation. The hospital switchboard had received phone messages from news services all morning and there were several reporters waiting in the lobby for the movie idol to arrive. It was rumoured among the staff that one of them was from *Life Magazine* and that there was going to

be a picture spread on the hospital in it.

Dr. Franz Lederer put in an early appearance and made a limping round of the patients at the same time that he conferred with Ralph on the details of the screen star's hospitalization. The restlessness seemed to spread to the patients and both Blanche Fisher and Irene were kept continually busy. Mrs. Duffy, whose face-lifting was still at the purplish, swollen stage, had nevertheless put on her most attractive negligée and began a regular pacing of the corridor in an effort to see and be seen by the screen star.

Irene smiled at Blanche. "Maybe she thinks they can compare notes on their operations. If Barry Mann gets his eyes on her and listens to her he'll be looking for the nearest exit."

The brown-eyed nurse nodded agreement. And then surprisingly asked: "Did you have a good time at the hotel last night?"

She looked at her but there was no indication of ill humour in her face. She finally said: "Yes. It's very nice. And the music isn't bad."

"My brother is a bus boy in the dining room," Blanche told her in explanation. "He saw Dr. Grant in there with someone. I guessed by his description it was likely you."

Irene smiled. "A good guess. We had a lot of gossip to go over about people we know at Manhattan General. The sort of thing no one else would have any interest in. So we decided it would be fun to make an evening of it."

"Of course," Blanche agreed, her pretty face a mask of any feelings she might have. "I hope I didn't give you a wrong idea about Dr. Grant and I. He's been very nice to me but there was never anything serious."

It seemed best to handle the situation lightly. Irene looked at the pretty girl with twinkling eyes. "Now how can you be so sure of that?"

"Please don't make fun of me," Blanche pleaded, her cheek twitching nervously. "I know that you two have been friends for ages."

"I'm sure he likes you too," Irene said. "Let's not try to handle this busy floor and settle Ralph's romantic future at the same time. We have a heavy day ahead."

It was not only true but it served to end a discussion that Irene felt would get them nowhere. She had no desire to see Blanche hurt and at the dizzy rate things had been happening she was by

no means sure of her own feelings. In the meantime it seemed that every patient required extra attention.

Just after lunch Barry Mann arrived by a side entrance. He bore down on the central desk followed by an entourage of his own doctor, a private nurse and his personal manservant. He was a tall, dark haired man with a handsome masculine face that was familiar to movie-goers the world over. Just now he wore the familiar dark glasses of a Hollywood celebrity.

Both Ralph Grant and Dr. Lederer were on hand to meet him. After a few minutes of introductions and handshakes the old specialist limped ahead of the party with Barry Mann at his side as they went down the corridor to the several rooms engaged by the film celebrity. Ralph and Mann's own doctor followed and the nurse and the manservant came after them.

Dr. Frank Sturgeon, the chubby anaesthetist, arrived in time to see the rear of the strange little parade but too late to be included in the round of introductions.

He looked at Irene with a chuckle. "Gives the place an oriental touch. Like a sultan and his court. Well, I suppose I may as well go down and join the cast."

With that the little bald man hurried after the party. By this time they had vanished into the large double room that Barry Mann was to occupy. It was ordinarily used for two and sometimes three patients so the screen star was sure to have lots of space.

Shortly after Ralph came back to the desk with the small, sad little man who was Barry Mann's personal physician. He introduced him to Irene and concluded, "Please give Dr. Darrell every co-operation possible."

The little man gave his attention to Irene with a smile. "Mr. Mann has a very strict diet. I think we sent the specifications ahead. Would you kindly check with your chief dietician? He's rather hungry now after our drive from New York and he'd like something right away."

"I'll phone downstairs," Irene promised.

While she did this the little man entered into an earnest discussion with Ralph Grant. It took her only a few minutes to get in direct touch with the head dietician and find out what had been done about the film star's diet. It turned out that the kitchen was fully

prepared and that a suitable meal would be sent up within a short time.

Irene turned back to the doctors and waited until they'd finished their talk. Then she told Dr. Darrell, "There'll be something up for Mr. Mann in a few minutes. The dietician has your list on file and everything is being prepared as you asked."

The little man rubbed his hands with satisfaction. "Fine. That's a major worry off our minds."

Now Dr. Lederer and the anaesthetist, Frank Sturgeon, joined the other two and they stood for a moment conferring about the plans for the following day. Irene was at her desk reading a chart for the new patient. But she could see and hear what was going on in the group.

Dr. Lederer's resonant tones dominated the talk. "It's a simple problem of removing the naso-genian fold and taking care of the eye area. I see no good reason for using anything but tranquilizers and local anaesthesia."

The small Dr. Farrell looked worried. "Still my patient is a very high-strung man."

Dr. Sturgeon now spoke. "It's all we ever use. What's your opinion, Dr. Grant?"

There was a slight moment of silence then Ralph said quietly, "I agree. Local anaesthetic should be used. It's actually very minor surgery."

Dr. Darrell sighed and relaxed slightly. "Well, I suppose I must leave it up to your good judgments. This is not my field. I'm very happy to have such competent people as yourself with me in this." He glanced from one to the other with a faint smile. "One of your colleagues in New York talked to an executive of our company and gave him a very poor impression of what kind of treatment we would get here. Of course I considered it pure nonsense and said so. But this New York man was quite vindictive in what he said, a Dr. Cabell Grant I think his name was."

Again a heavy silence descended on the group. Irene glanced across to see what Ralph's reaction was. He stood looking very pale with his lips pressed firmly together.

They operated on Barry Mann the next morning. Dr. Lederer came personally to Irene and requested that she be the assisting nurse. She would have preferred that he had asked Blanche since she also had operating room experience and had

been there the longest. But she could hardly refuse the old man. So she found herself one of the team that gathered in the Stockton Memorial's main operating room with its soft green and off-white walls.

Here under the shining light, surrounded by spotless chrome, the instrument table with its sterile scalpels, retractors, sponges, saline solution, the suction machine for siphoning off the saline, all the many aids of modern surgery they met, the surgeons and Dr. Darrell and Dr. Frank Sturgeon stood ready in cap, gown and mask. With them were Irene and another nurse in the same sterile outfits. The patient already groggy from a heavy dose of tranquilizer lay on the operating table, his body draped with a sheet and sterile towels with only his face and head exposed. He looked wan and old and no more that a caricature of the smiling hero who had made millions laugh and cry with him.

Old Dr. Lederer looking gaunt and venerable stood out among the others even in mask and gown. Now he gave an authoritative nod to Dr. Sturgeon who had been waiting at the head of the operating table. The chubby anaesthetist went to work at once. Irene noted that he first sprayed a topical agent on his patient's face. It would be some form of cocaine or cyclaine. Next he gave regular injections of something which she supposed novocaine or some other local anaesthetic.

"Give me the pencil, Ralph," the command came in Dr. Lederer's sonorous voice.

Ralph stepped forward with some sort of marking pencil and gave it to the old surgeon. At once he began to draw light guiding lines on the face of the film star. This went on for some minutes.

The outlining with the dermatographic pencil ended and Dr. Lederer put the crayon aside. He spoke to Ralph: "Make the incision at the hair line first."

Ralph turned to her: "Scalpel, Nurse!"

She had it ready for him and he took it in his rubber-gloved hand and began the delicate task of slicing the screen idol's skin at the right temple. He then cut off a strip of skin just under the hair. Following the outline of the senior surgeon he finished this first step. Next the entire upper half of this side of the face was drawn up in place and carefully stitched. The same procedure was followed on the other half of the actor's



"Well Nurse," he said, "I hear you were one of the butchers."

face, beginning with the incision at his temple and ending with the skin being drawn taut to exactly the same degree as in the previous instance.

Dr. Lederer leaned close to Ralph Grant and murmured something and the young surgeon nodded. Once again Irene handed him a scalpel and he began the incisions that would draw the skin into a firm position on the lower regions of Barry Mann's famous face. He worked deftly and as the minutes ticked by on the big wall clock he followed the drawn pattern indicated by Dr. Lederer. At last it was done and the skin stitched neatly in place.

Dr. Darrel had stood like a small statue during the more than forty minutes it took to complete the operation. Irene could almost feel his tenseness. Now he turned questioning eyes to Dr. Lederer.

The senior surgeon nodded. "It's all finished, Doctor. I believe the time was forty-three minutes. It can be done in less time but not with the kind of special care Dr. Grant has given your patient. I'd say he's knocked a year off his facial age for each three minutes he's worked on him."

The little doctor was so pleased he

rubbed his gloved hands together in the gesture of satisfaction that was one of his noticeable habits. Orderlies wheeled the star from the room and the doctor took off their masks and headed for the scrub room.

Dr. Lederer paused by Irene to pat her arm. "You've had good training, girl," he said, "you gave Dr. Grant fine support."

It was a day later before Irene had any conversation with the patient himself. She went into the star's room to make a routine check and found him sitting up disconsolately against several pillows. He turned to her with his bandaged, discoloured face.

"Well, Nurse," he said, "I hear you were one of the butchers."

"I helped with your operation," she said, "if that's what you mean. It came off very well. I'd say you were looking fine."

Barry Mann's eyes snapped with the humorous twinkle that was one of his trade marks. "I look," he told her, "like an underdone hamburger."

"I mean you look as well as can be expected," she said. "It sometimes takes a week or two before the swelling all vanishes and the results are apparent."

"Good news!" He gave a small groan. "Not only that, my face feels as if it would burst if I smiled."

"It will be like that for a time," Irene explained. "It's because of the tightly drawn skin. You don't want to stretch it too much for a few days at least. It could cause trouble and spoil the results."

Barry Mann sighed. "Thank heavens. I'll be seventy years old before I'm due for anything like this again." He glanced at Irene. "That's right isn't it? They don't do this sort of thing more than once in a dozen years?"

"I couldn't say exactly," Irene said. "I doubt if many people have it done more than once."

"Once is enough," the famous star said. "I'm fifty-eight years old and I don't look it if I do say so myself. But it's the cameras! The close-ups! I had to do something. But never again."

"Everyone is very thrilled to have you at the hospital," Irene smiled. "I know at least a dozen of the nurses who'll be wanting your autograph when you're feeling better."

"Autograph hunters!" Barry Mann winced. "Aside from my diet the thing that bothers me most is handing out autographs." He settled back against his pillows. "Miss Hall, do you think you could smuggle me in some decent food?"

She laughed. "I thought you were doing very well. The dietician is going to a lot of trouble to prepare the special menus your doctor gave her."

"I know," Barry Mann groaned. "That's the whole trouble. She's doing too good a job. If I don't get a bite of some decent food soon I'll never survive this."

Irene found her interest caught by his anguish. "Isn't this diet your own idea?"

He glared at her with a look that indicated she must be out of her mind. "Do you really think I'm the kind of person who likes all those salads and that health food junk they're handing me out? I'm a steak and spaghetti man!"

"But why?" Irene asked with a perplexed smile.

He leaned across to her confidentially. "I'll tell you why, Miss Hall. This is the studio's idea. They hire my doctor and nurse and the private detective who keep me under surveillance like some kind of crook. You see, to them I'm not a person any more. I'm a property. And these

people are mighty careful of the property, believe me!"

"You mean because you star in their pictures they think they can tell you what to do every minute of the day?"

Barry Mann nodded dolefully. "The minute they found out I had some draw at the box office they signed me up to a long term contract. It just goes on and on until I finally wind up with a company pension, just the same as a gatekeeper or a carpenter in the studio. I don't say they're not paying me a princely sum but I'm leading no royal existence. It isn't so bad when I'm well. Every once in awhile I can sneak off and do what I please and eat what I please. But I'm going mad in here!"

"I'll speak to your nurse," Irene suggested. "Maybe she can get you a nice steak from the kitchen."

"Don't do that!" Barry Mann begged. "She's one of them. The studio hand-picked her to spy on me. And it's the same with Darrell. You try and sneak me in a steak please, Miss Hall?"

His eyes were so sad that she had to stifle a desire to laugh. The idea of this six-foot handsome man of near sixty being treated like a troublesome child by his employers was too ridiculous.

She said: "I'll see what I can do. I'll have to wait until your nurse is at lunch or taking a coffee break."

"It seems to me her entire working day consists of coffee breaks," Barry Mann said angrily. "If you see her would you mind telling her that I'd like a little attention!"

Irene left the star and went back to the central desk where she found his private nurse talking to Blanche. The nurse was an ugly girl with mousy hair in an unpleasantly tight permanent wave with hollow cheeks and buck teeth. To top this she talked in a nasal whine. It was clear that the studio had been careful to select a nurse for their male star who would not turn his head with her feminine appeal.

Seeing Irene she gave her a pinched smile. "I've just been telling Miss Fisher she should go to Hollywood. There's lots of nurses needed out there and with a pretty face like hers she might wind up with a movie star for herself."

"It sounds very exciting," Irene said, attempting to be pleasant.

The private nurse sniffed. "Well, these movie people aren't as exciting as the fan magazines and their publicity agents would like you to believe. But the pay

is good and the climate is wonderful."

Blanche said: "Don't you have a lot of smog in Los Angeles?"

"Now and then," the private nurse admitted. "But they make a lot more of that than they should. It's only in certain areas you get it bad. I just can't wait to get back."

"I think Mr. Mann would like to see you," Irene told her.

The private nurse made a face. "Just because he performs like a trained seal in front of the cameras he thinks he's somebody! He doesn't impress me. I remember him when his name was Sid Gross and he did a corny song and dance act in night clubs." The private nurse turned to leave.

"One thing," Irene called after her, "when are you going to lunch?"

"I'll go at twelve," the private nurse said stiffly. "That's in half an hour."

"Fine," Irene said. "I'll keep an eye on your patient while you're gone."

After the private nurse had left Blanche looked up at Irene with an amused expression. "Why the sudden interest in Barry Mann? Are you thinking of going to Hollywood?"

Irene laughed. "Not this year. It's just a plot that he and I have worked out. I had to know when she'd be in the cafeteria."

Later when Dr. Darrell came by Irene made it a point to question him on Barry Mann's diet. She said, "It's so strict, Doctor, that I find myself wondering. Is his health in a precarious condition?"

"Oh, no!" The small man raised a hand in protest. "Quite the contrary. He is in most excellent condition. But the studio heads wish to keep him that way. They have a lot invested in him you know."

Irene looked at the fussy little doctor. "I see," she said. "It is more a question of protecting his future health than preventing him from harming any condition he has now."

Dr. Darrell nodded agreement and then glancing around to make sure there was no one in hearing distance he confided, "Personally I wouldn't like such an austere bill of fare for myself. Nor would I prescribe it for Barry. But the studio has these experts and they set up the programme for the stars. All I can do is try and see that they follow them."

"I see," Irene said. "It seems to me that the stars don't have much freedom. Barry Mann's menu wouldn't excite any envy from a patient on an ulcer diet. It

seems to me being a movie star isn't much fun."

"Confidentially," the little man said, "I have been employed as a physician by the movie companies for a quarter of a century and that is my own impression."

When lunch hour arrived Irene arranged with Blanche to take hers at one rather than twelve. This left her free to try and smuggle a steak to the hungry screen idol. It went off well and Barry Mann wolfed down the huge steak with such relish she was afraid he'd break his stitches.

After he finished he studied her with such admiration that she felt her cheeks go crimson. She picked up the plate and silver and said awkwardly, "I'd better get these out of here. Dr. Darrell might decide to come by."

"That quack!" Barry Mann dismissed him with disgust. "Let him come. I'm full of steak and happy!" He gave a contented sigh and relaxed against his pillows. Then he gave her a searching look. "My dear, have you ever considered coming to Hollywood?"

Somewhat startled she gasped: "Why no, I haven't."

He nodded. "Smart girl. I was just going to advise you against it."

On her way to lunch Irene met Ralph Grant in the corridor just outside the cafeteria. The young surgeon smiled at her. "I hear Barry Mann is giving you a busy time of it."

"He's really very nice," she told him.

"I think so too," Ralph agreed. "We're having a friend of yours in for an operation tomorrow."

"Really? Who?" she asked.

"Nils Pallin," he said. "We're having another try at his hand. I hope we have better luck this time." He hesitated a moment before he went on to ask, "Did Blanche ever say anything about the other night?"

"No," Irene said. "Beyond letting me know that her brother saw us in the hotel she's been very diplomatic. We've both tried to avoid you as a subject."

Ralph made a wry face. "Sounds promising. I wish my uncle would pick up the same idea. Did you hear Darrell tell everyone about his trying to keep Barry Mann from coming here?"

"I know," Irene said. "But the important thing is that he didn't manage to do it."

Ralph nodded. "Of course you're right. What's on your schedule for this evening?"

"I'm really tired," she told him. "And the Wentworths have Annie home for the first time since I've been there. I think I'll spend the evening quietly and go to bed early."

"I see," he said. "I'll have to watch out. First thing I know you'll be eating an apple a day."

She laughed. "To keep the doctor away! No! I wouldn't dream of anything so drastic. But I could do with some rest."

They settled on a tentative date for the weekend and she went on into the cafeteria and joined the line to fill her tray. When she'd finished she went back to find a table. She saw a hand raise and beckon to her. It was Dr. Franz Lederer who sat smiling and alone at the far end of the cafeteria.

She walked down to his table and joined him. The old man's face wore a broad smile. "I never miss a chance to have lunch with a pretty girl," he said. "And you are a most attractive girl, Miss Irene Hall!"

Irene took it in good humour but teased him by saying, "I'm sure you tell everyone that from the student nurses to the private duty specials."

"On my word," Dr. Lederer raised a gnarled hand with mock solemnity. "I am most chary with my compliments to the opposite sex. As a bachelor I must naturally be cautious."

"One of us will manage to compromise you one of these days," Irene said, carrying on the joke.

"Maybe so." The gaunt old man studied her with twinkling eyes. "But I have an idea that's more liable to happen to Ralph Grant. Especially as far as you're concerned."

She kept her eyes fixed on her plate. "Now I think you're guessing," she said.

"I suppose I am," he admitted with a sigh. "Or maybe prying into what doesn't concern me. Forgive me, my dear. But I mentioned it because I think you might be very good for Ralph. He's still in a troubled state of mind and he can use friends."

Now she glanced up at the old surgeon and saw that his lined face had taken on a serious expression. She said, "We were friends in New York for quite a long time."

"Ralph mentioned that," Dr. Lederer said. "He's been seeing a lot of that Fisher girl, the brown-eyed one. She's a nice little thing but too retiring and

insecure to do Ralph any good. He needs someone like you."

Irene managed a faint smile. "I had no idea you specialized in advice to the lovelorn as well as plastic surgery, Doctor."

The old man chuckled and folded his deformed hands on the table. "I deserve that. Poking my over-length nose into other people's business is as much a part of me as my arthritic joints. Please overlook an old man's foolishness."

"I think you're very nice," she said, sipping her coffee. "How is Rufus?"

Dr. Lederer's face clouded. "Not so good. His joints are in the same condition as mine. I leave him with the garage attendant part of the time during the day. He's good to him. But the poor old fellow is having trouble getting up and down."

"He must be very old," Irene said.

"Nearly fourteen," the surgeon said sadly. "That's almost a hundred in human years. So you see why we're such comrades. We're both matched in a race for the undertaker's."

Irene felt a deep sympathy for the old man and his pet. "I'm sure you'll both be around and active for a long time to come." And she picked up her tray to go.

Dr. Lederer raised himself to his feet with a groan. "These hips don't say so!"

Irene stayed at home that evening. The Wentworths were ecstatically happy about having Annie with them again. And the youngster was almost as thrilled at the idea of having her "pretty lady" living with them. Irene spent a wonderful hour playing with the child while her mother cleaned up after dinner. Then there was a short period with her father and Annie was put safely to bed.

The balance of the evening was much like the first one she spent there. It was a pleasant night although the dusk came much earlier than last time and there was a slight rustle of early Fall air in the trees overlooking the patio.

Nils Pallin arrived a few minutes after eight and they all went into the living room and sat around making light conversation. Irene thought the tall musician was looking much more rested than when she'd seen him before.

He glanced at his watch at a quarter-ten and said, "I must be going. I'm due in surgery tomorrow morning. I promised Dr. Lederer to turn in early."

Clyde Wentworth leaned forward in his chair, his round face full of interest and concern. "I hope you do as well as

Annie. It would have killed me to have had her go through life with that birthmark. The other children were beginning to notice it. Now she's getting off to a fresh start."

Nils nodded the graceful head with its slight touch of grey at the temples. "She is a lovely child. She'll grow into a beautiful woman."

Ellen Wentworth smiled happily. "I hope so. She's our only one so I suppose we overdo our love. Her future happiness means everything to us."

The tall man got up. "It may be a day or two before I get around again. I'll be staying at the hospital for at least twenty-four hours after they finish with me."

They all went as far as the door with him. Ellen said, "Do come back as soon as you can. We look forward to your nightly visits."

"And so do I," he smiled. Then turning to Irene he suggested, "Why not walk as far as the car? I don't think it's very cold out."

She nodded. "I'd enjoy some fresh air before bed."

As they walked out to the road together Nils said, "I had a nice bit of good news today."

She smiled up at him. "Really?"

He nodded. "A letter from the Philadelphia Symphony with an offer to conduct there in December."

"That's wonderful!" Irene said, her voice filled with happiness for him.

He gave her one of his grave smiles. "Yes, it is. I wrote one of my friends associated with the orchestra and told him that I was planning to try conducting and would be available. The answer came almost immediately. It will mean work and it will be a challenge. Also it will give me time to regain whatever facility my hand is going to get for playing."

"I think both Dr. Lederer and Dr. Grant are hopeful," she said.

He lifted his still twisted fingers and stared at them. "Perhaps one day I'll have command over them again," he said. "But no matter what happens I will always remember this summer and Stockton and the many wonderful people I have come to know."

Irene went directly to her room after he drove away. She was feeling terribly tired and wanted an extra hour or two of rest. Like Nils Pallin she was thankful that she had come to Stockton and her new position with Dr. Lederer's clinic.

Although she supposed there were some people who would rather she hadn't come. Such as Blanche Fisher. She was sure the brown-eyed girl wouldn't admit resentment at her arrival. But Irene had changed things for her. Not that she had come with any such intention. She certainly hadn't expected to hear Ralph Grant come out so forthrightly with his declaration of love for her. She wondered if she'd done the right thing in giving him even the slight encouragement she had? At least Dr. Lederer seemed to think so. And he was a very wise old man.

Next morning Nils Pallin arrived for his operation. Irene did not assist on the case. But she heard afterwards that the doctors had given him a general anesthetic and the operation had taken more than an hour. She saw him stretched out pale and motionless as they wheeled him to a private room. Knowing what this ordeal meant to the handsome violinist she made a silent prayer that this time the operation would bring about the desired results.

It was not long afterwards that Dr. Lederer came limping up to her at the desk and said, "I want you to keep a close watch on Nils Pallin. He will be in some pain for awhile. I've prescribed sedation. No doubt he'll have to stay in hospital for several days."

Irene said quietly, "I'll see to it. Will it be his last operation?"

The old man nodded, his gaunt face serious. "We did everything that we could do today. From now on it will be a question of time and therapy."

Nils stayed on at the hospital for six days and they were busy ones for Irene and all the rest of the staff. In spite of having his private nurse and doctor Barry Mann gave everybody else some extra work. Irene didn't mind because the movie star amused her. She continued to smuggle him in steaks whenever she had the opportunity. And he claimed that she alone was making his continued living possible.

When the day came for him to leave he took her aside and said, "If ever I can do you a favour, Miss Hall, I want you to call on me." And he insisted on giving her his New York as well as his Hollywood address.

Irene thanked him and told him how handsome his face was looking. Actually he did seem much younger now that the swelling had subsided and most of the discoloration had vanished.

He gave her one of his famous smiles and said, "Only four more years to go on my present contract, honey. Then I'm going to grow just as old and wrinkled as I like on my own relaxed time."

A new patient immediately took Barry Mann's room and she understood he would be at the hospital for a long time. The man had been a lineman with an electric power company and while doing a repair job had fallen across some live wires. Although the power had been immediately shut off and his life miraculously saved there were severe burns on his neck and face. He had come to Stockton Memorial Clinic to have the scars removed.

When she and Ralph had met on Sunday he'd told her about the case. They had driven to nearby Sharon for dinner and then spent until dark touring through the pretty countryside. They'd talked a lot about things at the hospital and their own plans for the future. And

again there was a mention of Blanche Fisher.

"I think she's very fond of you," Irene told him.

Ralph showed annoyance. "I hope she likes me as I like her," he said. "But I certainly never gave her any reason to think I might be more than a friend. I'd like you to get over your guilt feeling about us as regards her."

So Irene said no more. They were working together once again and happy in each other's company. And already they were making vague plans for the added happiness that lay ahead.

Then one evening when Irene arrived home she found a letter waiting for her in the tray in the hallway where Ellen always left her mail. She stood for a moment staring at it, thinking that she remembered the handwriting. Hurrying to the privacy of her room she sat down on the bed and opened it. Glancing first at the signature she saw that, as she expected, it was from the young chest surgeon, Max Marshall.

CHAPTER FIVE

IRENE read the letter through. And then she read it again. Afterwards she put it down and sat for some time on the bed thinking about it. The divorce proceedings were already under way between Max and Betty Marshall and he wrote as if he was still as obsessed with his love for her as when she'd left Manhattan General. The tone of the letter was sincere and he had ended it by saying that he would be in Stockton the following weekend and wanted to see her.

Of course he was coming to Stockton only to see her! He knew that Ralph Grant was here and that they would have renewed their friendship. But he wouldn't have guessed how far Ralph had gone in frankly telling her of his love for her. It was something she would have to find a way to explain to Max. She had not encouraged him to divorce Betty when she found out he was married. He had lied to her in the beginning. Now she forgave him that but she would not take any responsibility for his ending his marriage. That had been his own idea. Unfortunately for him it did nothing to change things between them.

From the beginning she supposed that

she had been in love with Ralph. Even though neither of them had talked about it up to the time he left Manhattan General. But the feeling had been there on both their parts. Now she was certain that they would go on to share their lives together.

She wanted to let Max know this without hurting him. Perhaps the best way would be to tell him openly and bluntly at the first opportunity. It was ridiculous for him to go on imagining they could pick up the romance they'd briefly enjoyed. It had been an abortive affair made possible by her loneliness and his deceiving her about his marital state. She decided to talk to Ralph about it at once.

They had a date that evening to go to the annual Stockton Fall Fair together. It was a popular event held every September before the weather became too wet and cold. Crowds gathered from various sections of the State. Ralph parked his car as near the fair ground as possible which still meant a walk of two blocks to the main entrance. They could hear the distant music of the midway rides and see the reflection of the bright

lights against the dark sky. Crowds filled the streets giving the small town an unusual round of gaiety and excitement.

They passed through the main entrance and strolled along the midway with its ferris wheel, merry-go-round and sky planes. At Ralph's insistence they paused by garish booths, bright with talking dolls and blankets, to take chances on wheels of fortune that invariably came to an exasperating stop on numbers nobody had. It was hard to reconcile the image of the serious young doctor with the boyish exuberance of the man whose arm she held as they made their way through the noisy fantasy of carnival land.

Since they were both comparative newcomers to Stockton few people recognized them. They enjoyed this as a relief from the decorum they usually had to show at the hospital.

When they came to the side show section Ralph stopped before the Museum of Curiosities and insisted that he must go in and see the fat woman whose figure was displayed on one of the faded colour banners strung up before the long brown tent.

"It's just a waste of time and money," Irene laughingly protested.

"Not a bit of it," Ralph said with mock seriousness. "It's a scientific display. Glandular disturbance you know. We shouldn't pass it by."

So they went inside the dimly lit, chilly tent and paused for a few seconds in front of a sniffing, miserable fat lady who looked reasonably normal in weight and much more like somebody's mother-in-law than the grotesquely overweight character depicted on the banner. They moved on to watch the magician, the flea circus and the Hawaiian dancer doing a weary hula. After that Irene managed to drag him back to the welcome fresh air of the open midway.

"Next on the must list are hotdogs and coffee," he said leading her over to the tempting aroma of a hotdog stand where they stood under the bright lights and munched the indigestible but delicious concoction of frankfurter, mustard, onions, relish and steamed slightly stale roll.

Irene rolled her eyes as she wiped her lips with the paper napkin thoughtfully provided by the purveyor of the treat. "I know I'll never sleep tonight," she said.

Ralph grinned at her. "Highly beneficial for the lining of the stomach," he insisted. "Stimulates the acid."

"Let's get away from this noise," she pleaded. "We haven't been near the livestock or the sewing and produce exhibits."

This started them on a long tour of near dark cattle pens filled with bewildered and sometimes sleeping cattle, long aisles of monster pumpkins, turnips and apples and rooms with tables and walls covered with every kind of sewing from plain aprons to fancy crochet pieces of stunning intricacy. All the items bore little cards in red, white or blue indicating the prizes they had won.

At last they were both completely tired and fled the fair grounds for the comfort and peace of one of the town's better restaurants. After they had ordered toast and coffee, which was all either of them felt able to cope with, they relaxed and began to talk. It was then that Irene told Ralph about the letter from Max Marshall.

The young doctor studied her. "So he's actually coming up here," he said.

"I don't think anything I could say would stop him," Irene said.

"Probably not. Better to let him come and then you can explain in person. Perhaps you could arrange to have me meet him. Would that make it easier?"

She gave him a wry smile. "I hardly think so. He's very proud. I don't want to embarrass him if I can avoid it. Probably the best thing is for me to reserve Saturday night to spend with him and tell him."

Ralph looked glum. "That means I'll be alone Saturday night."

"I could say we'll have the rest of our lives together," she reproved him. "But it sounds so final and stuffy. Just the same this will be his only night. I think we'd best plan it as I said."

Ralph was inclined to take a pessimistic view of the situation. His serious young face was full of doubt. "I have an idea he's the persistent type," he said. "He may not want to accept your answer. If he takes that line of action he could be a nuisance."

"I don't think we need worry about that."

"Still he has gone out on a limb to win you over," Ralph pointed out. "He's going to make a big thing of the fact he's divorcing his wife."

"He and Betty hadn't made a go of their marriage anyway," Irene said.

"They would have parted long before now but she fought the divorce."

The young surgeon raised his eyebrows. "Then why did she finally change her mind?"

Irene knew her cheeks had gone red. She looked down. "She said she was sure that he was really in love with me. And she thought I'd make him a good wife."

Ralph leaned back in his chair with a small groan. "It's even worse than I guessed." You actually have his wife's blessing.

"I don't think that counts under the circumstances," Irene protested.

He leaned across the table again. "Don't you see it will make him twice as determined to have you marry him?"

She shook her head. "I'm not going to worry about it. If he comes on Saturday I'll see him and tell him, that's all there will be to it."

"I wish it was all over with," Ralph said gloomily.

As Saturday approached Irene began to wish the same thing. It was a meeting she would have preferred to avoid. But there it was, a part of her past. It had to be settled and there was no easy way. At least she wasn't faced with a sad Blanche Fisher every day. The brown-eyed girl had gone back to general duty in another part of the hospital. But it left Irene alone to handle the daytime problems.

All the rooms on the plastic surgery floor were occupied. And there had been a steady round of operations. Some of them had been of a minor sort such as correcting nasal deformities and small birthmarks but at least two of them had been of a major type and required special care. One of these being the man who had been scarred by live electric wires and the other, a woman whose leg had been badly disfigured in a car accident.

Each night Irene went home tired. Life at the Wentworths continued to be pleasant although with the cooler weather they no longer enjoyed the friendly evening talks out on the patio. Clyde Wentworth was involved with a lot of local service clubs and committees who had now resumed their Fall activities and kept him out a good many nights attending various meetings. Even Ellen had a church group to attend and also was on the local school board. So many nights Irene found herself alone baby-sitting with Annie.

This was not an unpleasant task as she'd grown to love the little girl. Annie in return called her Aunt Irene and never missed a chance to snuggle up on her lap. Occasionally Nils Pallin came by in the evening but he was working on a musical composition which took a lot of his time and he was also beginning to play again in a very limited manner.

"I am like an awkward beginner," he smiled at Irene, on one of his visits. "But I must force myself to listen to the awful sounds and keep on trying."

"You must do that or you'll never improve," she said.

"I know," he nodded his handsome head. "The months have slipped away so quickly since I've been here. Soon I'll be returning to New York."

She felt a sense of regret on hearing this. She'd forgotten that he was only a visitor. He had been part of the Stockton she'd known since she arrived. "I'll miss you, Nils," she said.

He looked at her with fond eyes. "And I shall miss you also. But let us promise to meet some time again."

"Yes," she said fervently, "we must do that."

He stood to go. "But you will not be too lonely," he said with twinkling eyes, "there is the young doctor—Dr. Grant?"

There was such kindness and concern in his manner that she did not resent the question or feel embarrassed by it. "Ralph and I are fond of each other," she admitted.

Nils Pallin nodded. "That is good. Good for you both. There is a danger for him if he devotes himself solely to his work for too many years. One day he might wake up to find that his work is the only wife possible. That is how it is with me."

She smiled. "I find that hard to believe."

"But it is true," he argued. "I have given so much of myself to my music there is not anything left for a wife and family. So you find me a lonely man depending on friends and strangers for a sympathetic ear and company. That is not good. Such things I should have found in a wife. But it is too late now. My years are growing short and all of them must be dedicated to music."

"The world is a lot richer for your dedication," she said, looking up at him with a hint of moistness in her admiring eyes.

He took her gently by the arms. "There are times I would gladly change

places with some simple fellow with a good wife and many children. So don't let your young surgeon live to have regrets. Marry him and take care of his happiness." He touched his lips to her cheek in the same way he had that first night they met.

After he left she sat by the fireplace thinking about what he had said. It would be terribly easy for someone like Ralph who had such dedication to his profession to grow old and tired like Dr. Lederer without knowing the love of a wife or the comforts of his own home. She was glad things had worked out as they had. If she hadn't come to Stockton she might never have seen Ralph again, let alone be planning to marry him. All that remained now was to talk to Max Marshall when he came on Saturday and clear up that remnant of the past.

On Saturday morning it began to rain hard. It was the first heavy rain in several weeks and Irene almost felt the dark, stormy day was an omen of what might be in store for her when she met Dr. Max Marshall. She kept hoping that he might change his mind and not come to Stockton after all. It would be a long nasty drive in the rain and there was a chance he might at least postpone the trip. By the time she was ready to go home it seemed certain that he wasn't coming. There had been no phone call at the hospital.

Ralph came up to her floor a short time before her shift ended and stood looking at her with worried eyes. "No word yet?"

She shook her head. "He should have got here by now if he were coming. I have an idea the storm may have changed his mind."

The plastic surgeon's serious young face was shadowed. "I doubt that. I'll bet you have a phone call as soon as you get home."

Irene gave him a rueful smile. "You sound as if you wanted to win the bet."

"I don't," he said. "But I'm sure I will."

And it turned out he was right. She'd barely got inside the door when the phone rang. Ellen took the call and turned to her with a smile, "For you. A man."

Hesitantly she picked up the phone and of course it was Max on the other end of the line. He seemed in a buoyant mood. "Had an awful drive," he told her, "there was a detour just this side of the State line that sent me over miles of

muddy torn-up highway. But I've finally made it."

"You have determination!" She tried to sound lightly casual. "I was sure you wouldn't drive up here in this rain."

"I told you I'd be here," he said. "The hotel seems to have a nice restaurant and dancing. I'll come by to pick you up in about an hour and a half. Or sooner if you'll let me."

"An hour and a half will be fine," she said, feeling the night would stretch out long enough without his coming early.

She took a shower and went slowly about the business of getting dressed. It was not an evening to which she looked forward and Max's happy tone had only made her more certain that it would be difficult. The rain was still beating down steadily as she went over to the closet to select a dress. Because of the weather she decided on a short black cocktail dress that would be easy to wear under her raincoat. People usually dressed a bit more formally for the Saturday night buffet and dance at the hotel.

It was just a few minutes before seven when Max called for her. She was ready and waiting and opened the door to him. He stepped inside and took off his dripping hat as he smiled at her.

"Good to see you again, darling," he said. And he bent forward and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"You're dripping wet!" She backed away from him with a small laugh, glad to have an excuse.

"It's some night," he said. "I'm glad the hotel is only a short drive away. Shall we get started?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I'll get my key. I forgot to put it in the pocket of my raincoat." And she ran back along the hall to her room to find it. When she returned Max was peering into the living room.

"This is very nice," he said.

"It's wonderful here," Irene agreed. "If we had more time I'd show you around. There's a nice patio and garden out back but no use going there in this wet."

"Another time," Max smiled. And they hurried out to the car through the downpour.

On the drive to the hotel Max talked mostly about the doings at Manhattan General since she'd left. It seemed that Dr. Cabell Grant had become even more eccentric and demanding of his staff. The supervising nurse who had succeeded

Irene had only stayed with the job a fortnight. And the new girl was threatening to leave as soon as she could find another suitable position. There had also been some changes in the general staff at the hospital.

"Dr. Silber has retired." Max glanced at her with a proud smile. "And I've been made head of Thoracic Surgery."

"Congratulations!" Irene said, genuinely pleased. She'd had no idea that Max would be considered to head the department as there were several others who had been there longer.

He stared at the road ahead through the small cleared arc his struggling windshield wipers managed to keep free of the driving rain. "It's just one of those lucky breaks," he said. "There were at least two others as well qualified as myself. But Dr. Silber felt I was the one he wanted to succeed him. So I'm a lot busier these days."

"You must be," she agreed. "You shouldn't have taken the time to come away up here."

His expression was serious. "The reason for my being here is just as important as my job. In fact, more so, as far as I'm concerned."

She hastened to get the talk back to the hospital again. "Have you talked with Dr. Cabell Grant since I left?"

"A couple of times in the cafeteria," Max said. "He asked if I'd seen you and grumbled about you working with his nephew."

"He still has that silly feud on with Ralph," Irene said.

"He seems very emphatic about Ralph's shortcomings," Max smiled. "And I'm not the one to disagree. I know very little of what happened between them."

"Neither do I," Irene said quickly. "But I can't condone his attitude. It isn't even ethical or professional."

"You'll find lots of similar situations in every hospital," Max said as he headed the car into the hotel parking lot. "I guess you have to chalk it up to the frailty of human nature."

The hotel dining room was well filled for a wet Saturday night. The weekly buffets were extremely popular and generally drew a crowd. Irene and Max made a tour of the tables of tempting food with plates in hand and by the time they returned to their own table both had them too generously heaped with the many delicious things offered.

Irene stared down at the big portions

of roast beef, lobster and turkey with dismay. "I never eat anything like this much!"

Max laughed. "That's the attraction of buffets. They give you a chance to be a glutton in style."

Somehow they finished the big helpings and went back to select a light dessert and coffee. Irene marvelled at the artistic arrangement of the food dishes in a colourful pattern against sparkling white tablecloths. Set pieces were large ice sculptures of sailing ships with lighted candles at suitable intervals. They decided on fruit cocktail with sherbert as dessert.

By the time they'd finished their coffee the orchestra had started to play for dancing. Max lit a cigarette and smiled at her.

"It's good to be with you again," he said.

"I've enjoyed seeing you and hearing about the hospital," she said. At the same time she wondered desperately how long she could keep the conversation at this rather impersonal level.

It wasn't to be for long. Almost at once the young chest surgeon said, "I did write you that the divorce is under way?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Max looked somewhat embarrassed for him and she realized he was a rather boyish figure with his crew-cut sandy hair and round face. He leaned towards her earnestly. "It seems too good to be true after the long wait I've had. I don't think I'd have got Betty to consent to it if she hadn't met you."

"I'm sure she would have eventually," Irene said.

Max shook his head. "No. She told me herself she's going along with the divorce because she approves of you. She thinks we could be happy together."

"Max," Irene began and then hesitated as she looked down at the table, "this kind of talk is very embarrassing to me. I wish you wouldn't—"

He raised his eyebrows. "I don't get you, Irene. Surely you're not still cross at me? I've proven to you I meant to be honest."

"It's not that, Max."

"Then what is it?" He raised his voice so that she was grateful for the background music of the orchestra.

After a quick glance to make sure that they hadn't attracted attention she turned to him and said, "I'm not in love



"I've broken up my marriage for you. Then I come here and get a reception like this!"

with you, Max. I don't think I ever was."

The young chest surgeon's face became angry. "You were until you came up here."

"You know that isn't true," she protested. "Being up here has nothing to do with it."

His eyes met hers and there was such cold hatred in them that it frightened her. He said, "What about Ralph Grant?"

She shrugged. "Why bring Ralph into this?"

"Because he's part of it," Max snapped. "Tell me that you and he haven't been seeing each other. Tell me he's not the man in your future now!"

"I've seen Ralph," she admitted. "I am very fond of him. It may or may not amount to something. But I don't see how that concerns you."

Max stubbed his cigarette out fiercely. "I predicted this would happen."

She gave him a pleading look. "Max, please let us part friends."

"After what you've done?" He looked at her incredulously. "I've broken up my marriage for you. I've been proud of my promotion because you would share the honour with me. I've waited until I knew the divorce was certain to come and see you and share the good

news together. Then I come here and get a reception like this!"

"I've been hoping all along you wouldn't come," Irene told him. "Coming here was your idea. So was the divorce. I didn't even know you were married. It's no use trying to blame me, Max."

The sandy-haired man seemed to lose some of his anger but his face remained strangely pale for him. He made a small pattern on the white cloth with his hand. "I don't know where this leaves me," he said. "I'd built all my hopes for the future on you."

"You knew that was wrong," she said quietly.

He sighed. "I've been afraid. After that row we had in New York. And knowing you'd be with Grant again up here. But we had so much fun for awhile. We seemed so right for each other—" He paused and gave her a pleading look. "Think it over, Irene. Take your time. I'll wait as long as you like. Don't make a decision on this tonight."

"I could agree to those terms and get out of an awkward situation easily," she said, her eyes meeting his. "But that wouldn't be fair to anyone. Let's face

facts. You'll find someone else. I'm sure of it."

There was a long moment of silence. At last he said, "So that's the way it's going to end."

"Tonight is the end, Max," she said. "If, or when, we meet again it will be just as old friends. Very good friends, but merely friends."

He looked at her and then at the orchestra. "Do you want to dance?" he asked.

"I don't feel particularly like it," she admitted. "Unless you do?"

"I'm not exactly in a dancing mood," he said with meaning.

"Actually I have a headache," Irene said. "I'd appreciate it if you'd take me home now."

He gave her a wry smile. "Why not? That's all there is left to do. Except wish you a very formal goodnight."

And that was what he did. There was no conversation between them on the short drive back to the Wentworths. Each of them was occupied with their own thoughts. There was a certain sadness in this, their moment of parting. There had been good times when they'd been happy together. Under other conditions the happiness could easily have continued because they had much in common.

But, as it turned out, there had been a false basis for their joy. Once that had been revealed they'd lost the chance of a future together. All the rest was anti-climatic.

Max saw her to the door and stood for a moment in the rain as she turned the key in the lock. When she had the door open she glanced around at him.

"Goodbye, Max," she said. "I'm sorry."

He didn't answer but stood for a moment staring at her with such an expression of hurt that she was afraid he might break into tears. Then he turned and walked slowly through the rain to his car.

She didn't wait until he'd driven away but went inside and closed the door after her. And it seemed to her that in this moment she had also closed the door on the last link with her days at the Manhattan General Hospital.

Sunday the weather cleared and it was bright and sunny by afternoon. But it

was much cooler and quite a few of the trees had lost leaves during the storm. There was more than a hint of Fall in the air.

Ralph came by around two o'clock and he and Irene went for a long walk. She wore a fawn coat and he had on a heavy corduroy suit. There was a park up the road from the Wentworths with a small lake that was used for swimming in the summer and an area of flower gardens. There was also a rustic path through trees and over huge boulders that led around the lake. They leisurely followed this as they talked.

Irene told him all that had happened the night before and the way Max had reacted to her telling him that she was not in love with him. She ended by saying, "I imagine he's on his way back to the city by now."

"Must be," Ralph agreed. "I called the hotel and checked after I phoned you. He'd left early in the morning."

She looked up at him with mild surprise. "You're very thorough."

The young surgeon smiled. "That fellow really had me worried. I wondered if he might hang around and try and see you again today."

She shook her head. "No. He realized it was all over last night. He left without even saying goodbye. I couldn't help feeling sorry for him."

"That's what worried me most," Ralph said. "I was afraid you might get feeling so sorry for him you'd try and let him down easy and so leave everything up in the air."

"Well, I didn't."

"No, you didn't." Ralph hesitated as they came to the top of a hill that gave them a clear view of the lake and the trees on the opposite shore that were now clothed in colourful autumnal hues of vivid red and gold. "Isn't that a sight!" He took in the scene with an expression of awe on his face.

"Isn't it lovely!" she agreed.

"It's been years since I tramped through the woods like this at the time of the leaves changing colour," he said. "Every day I find new reasons that make me thankful I decided to come to Stockton."

"I know," she said. "I've enjoyed it too. But will you be able to stay on here indefinitely? I know Dr. Lederer is wonderful and the clinic is well run but

won't you eventually have to move on to larger hospitals in other centres?"

He gave her a rueful smile. "That will depend largely on my record here. As you know I'm not getting any recommendations from my uncle."

"In spite of that you'll get offers of more important positions," she said. "Dr. Lederer is behind you now and his approval will count for more than your uncle's ever could."

They resumed their walk along the path with its stately, sheltering birch trees rising majestically skyward. Ralph said, "Eventually I suppose I'll get restless and want to move on. Just now all this seems too good to be true. I've never been more content in my life. And having you here with me makes it really perfect."

"It has been wonderful," she said with a happy sigh. "I'll always remember this summer here as one of the good ones." She linked her arm in his.

From force of habit Ralph began to talk shop. "I had a long distance call yesterday," he told her. "I intended to mention it and then forgot. Some young fellow phoned me from New York about operating on his wife."

"Strange he didn't contact some of the plastic surgeons there," Irene said. Usually most of the cases at Stockton Memorial were referred to by other doctors and occasionally by other plastic surgeons who might feel the clinic could do more for their patients than they could. "He'd talked to a plastic surgeon in the city and he said that he'd ask him if he preferred to have us do the operation if we'd consider it. He seemed much impressed that we'd operated on Barry Mann," Ralph said.

"Perhaps that explains it," Irene suggested. "They are probably in show business too and want to have the same doctor as the great Barry."

Ralph laughed. "As a matter of fact they are theatre people. The young man said they were folksingers. But I hardly think they're likely to be in the same money class as Barry Mann."

"Folk singers are all over the place today," Irene said. "It's the new fad. But I doubt if many of them make much. What sort of operation does his wife require?"

The young surgeon kicked a small stone from the path. "He didn't go into

any great detail. But I gathered she'd been in an auto accident that left a scar on her cheek. Now she has a chance to go on television and she wants to get rid of the scar."

"Sounds like a logical reason," she said. "When are they coming to the hospital?"

"I'm expecting them tomorrow morning," Ralph said. "But you know what people are like. I may never see them..."

It turned out that he was wrong in this prediction. Irene was in the main office with Ralph when the two made their appearance a little before noon on Monday. She could see at once that the young husband and wife were from the bottom layer of show business just as certainly as Barry Mann had been from the top.

They were both thin and dark-skinned with straight black hair and a hungry, anxious expression in their faces and eyes. It developed they were from the San Francisco area and had journeyed to the East Coast looking for work. On their way through the mid-West they had been involved in a bad car accident. As a result there was a three inch jagged scar running down the girl's left cheek from directly below her eye. Otherwise she was pretty in a gaunt way. Their names were Jim and Sara Davis.

Both Ralph and Dr. Lederer examined the girl. The old surgeon waved an arthritic arm impatiently. "If the doctor who looked after that in the first place had done his work properly you wouldn't need to be here now. That's a botched job if I've ever seen one. What do you think, Dr. Grant?"

Ralph's serious young face was sober as he bent over the girl to study the scar once more. He straightened up with a shake of his head. "I can't imagine anyone not taking more care."

The young husband sneered. "We were broke when it happened. You don't get much attention in a charity ward. Can you get rid of it, Doc?"

Ralph nodded. "No big problem about that. Do you want it done right away?"

The girl, who seemed the milder of the two, gave her husband a quick, frightened glance. "What do you think, Jim?" she asked anxiously.

The dark young man was emphatic.

"Sure. We want it done quick. See, we have this chance to do a TV series. And it means a lot. We've got a nightclub spot in the Village now but the pay is peanuts. If we can land on TV we'll be able to make some real cash."

Dr. Lederer had returned to the chair behind his desk and he studied the young husband with his keen eyes. "You told Dr. Grant that you had been to a plastic surgeon in New York. Why didn't you have the operation done there? I would have thought it more convenient."

Jim Davis licked his lips nervously. "I only saw one guy. A big shot at the Manhattan General. He said he could do it all right and I was to come back and see him. But I had an idea he was stalling because I didn't have the money to pay right away."

Dr. Lederer exchanged a questioning glance with Ralph. Then he looked at the young man with a stern expression on his lined face. "You must mean Dr. Cabell Grant. If so I doubt if he was stalling, as you put it. He does a great many free operations."

The young husband shrugged. "Anyway he wasn't interested."

The girl spoke now in her quiet, furtive way. "Jim means he didn't want to do it as soon as I needed it done."

"Yeah," her husband agreed. "This TV thing won't wait."

Dr. Lederer folded his gnarled arthritic hands on the desk in front of him and considered a moment. Then he said, "It will take about a week. Your wife will be in hospital most of that time. Have you made arrangements for a place to stay?"

The thin young man shrugged. "I'll find something at a motel. Or maybe I'll sleep in the station wagon."

His wife registered alarm at this and gave him a pleading look. "No, Jim. It's getting too cold for that."

Ralph picked up the conversation at this point. "There are a number of very reasonably priced rooms available near the hospital," he said. "Miss Hall will give you the names of two or three before you go."

Irene had mimeographed copies of the rooms available with their rates listed. She found herself feeling sorry for the forlorn young couple and she was sure that both the surgeons shared her feelings.

Dr. Lederer said, "Can we do Mrs. Davis in the morning, Ralph?"

He nodded. "I think so. We're scheduling another graft operation for the burn patient and we can take care of Mrs. Davis before we do him." He glanced across the desk to Irene. "Will you make a note of that, Miss Hall."

It was arranged for Sara Davis to stay in the hospital until her operation and Irene gave the young husband a list of the rooms available and he left. Later when she went back to the main office she found that Ralph had lingered longer than usual to discuss the interview with Dr. Lederer.

"I feel there is something odd about that fellow's manner," Ralph said. "I can't put my finger on it. But he seems too tense and jumpy."

Dr. Lederer sighed. "Maybe it's because he hadn't any money. It isn't easy to approach strangers and ask for a thing like this with only empty pockets to offer."

"I don't think he suffers from any delicacy where money is concerned or the lack of it," Ralph said. "There's something more to it. Perhaps they are not really married. That might be it." He turned to Irene. "What's your opinion?"

Irene found herself the focal point of the two surgeons' attention. She tried to clarify her own impression of the interview so that she might be able to offer a helpful answer.

"They were both very tense," she admitted. "But I think it's mostly because they've been through a good deal and this operation means a great deal to them."

"That's my own feeling," Dr. Lederer nodded gravely.

Ralph eyed her sharply. "You really think that's all?"

"I do," she said. "I think they're married all right. She has a wedding ring and there is something married in their attitude towards each other. I mean for people of their type and in their present position. He is very casual and she is protective of him."

The old surgeon chuckled. "We have a psychologist in our midst, Ralph."

Irene blushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound dramatic."

"It's all right," Ralph smiled. "I

think you should keep up your amateur detective work. Talk to the girl, and her husband as well, if you get the chance. If they let anything drop that seems important let us know at once."

Dr. Lederer looked up at Ralph with a meaning expression. "There is one other possible way of finding out something more about them. They have been to see your uncle."

The young surgeon was startled. "You mean call Uncle Cabell and ask him what he knows about the case?"

The old man spread his twisted hands. "It's one way of getting around it."

Ralph's face reddened. "I can't think of anything I'd care to do less."

"Well, let it go," the old man suggested. "I think you're making too much of this anyway."

"Perhaps so," Ralph agreed reluctantly. "I'll think about making that call to New York. As a matter of professional courtesy he'd have to answer me."

"Certainly," Dr. Lederer said. "I could make the call myself if you'd rather." He gave Ralph one of his appraising stares. "But you have no reason to be afraid of him, have you?"

There was a short moment of silence before Ralph replied. Irene thought it was an odd question and also that the old doctor had tossed it at his younger colleague in a blunt, startling way. She saw a strange mixture of anger and embarrassment in Ralph's face.

When he spoke his voice was obviously trembling. "I'm not afraid of him," he said in a barely audible tone. "I'll make the call after dinner." And he turned and left the office without another word.

Dr. Lederer gave a light whistle and chuckled. "It seems I've touched a bare nerve." He looked at Irene. "But then I'm not noted for my diplomacy, am I?"

Not knowing exactly what to say she smiled and offered no answer. It worried her to see the man she loved tormented by this trouble in his past. In the press of activity of the past few weeks she hadn't given the feud between Ralph and his uncle much thought. Now this brought it all vividly to her again. One way she could help was to find out all she could about the young folk singer and his wife. And she determined to do this.

But it didn't turn out to be an easy assignment she'd given herself. In fact she felt that she got nowhere with it. Sara

Davis was a shy, frightened waif-like creature who stared up at Irene from her pillow with nervous eyes and evaded answering questions.

Irene was torn between her sympathy for the girl and her loyalty to Ralph. She tried to make her questioning casual and pleasant. "You didn't like the New York surgeon?" she asked with a smile.

"He was all right," Sara Davis said. "But he couldn't do the operation right away?"

"I guess not. Jim knows. I don't."

"Do you have to audition for the TV show soon?" she asked.

The girl's answer was only too familiar. "I don't know. Ask Jim."

And so it went with most of the questions. Irene realized that her chances of finding out anything from Sara Davis were nil. The girl was on her guard. But against what?

Jim Davis did not call on his wife during the rest of Irene's shift so she did not see him again until the next morning when he came to the hospital to wait while his wife was being operated on.

Meanwhile when she saw Ralph for a few minutes that evening she found him still worried. It was the night of his monthly board meeting and he didn't get to her place until after eleven.

Irene put down the book she'd been reading and let him in. Over coffee and sandwiches they sat in the living room and chatted. In due course the conversation came to Jim and Sara Davis.

"I didn't find out a thing," Irene confessed. "She seems afraid to talk."

"That's why I'm so curious about them."

"Did you put that call through to your uncle?" she asked.

He glanced down at the carpet. "Yes. It wasn't one of the most successful interviews I've ever had. He was cold and brief. He had seen the girl. They had discussed a possible operation. But they hadn't come back to confirm the details."

"Maybe they did read in the paper about your doing Barry Mann and decided they'd rather have you," Irene suggested. "They're very young and stagestruck. It would please them to have the same surgeon as a big movie star."

He looked at her with worried eyes. "That's the only answer. It has to be the

answer. And yet I have the feeling there is something they are not telling me."

"They've had a hard time of it," Irene said. "Maybe that's why they both have that strange, furtive manner."

"You're likely right," he smiled, relaxing a little and becoming more like his usual self. "My nerves must be getting bad. I'm much too jittery these days." He glanced at his watch. "Well, with a full operating schedule for the morning I'd better get a good night's sleep." And he got up.

At the door she said, "I was worried about you this morning."

He laughed. "You mean when Lederer jumped on me about my uncle?"

I saw your face. It gave me a terrific lift I tell you. I said to myself, there's the face of a woman in love."

She felt her cheeks burn. "Surely it wasn't all that obvious," she said softly.

He took her by the arms. "Not to anyone else perhaps. But it was to me. I saw your concern and how much you cared. And I had to feel it was more than I deserve. Thank you, darling."

And he took her in his arms and held her close for a long, tender kiss. And even in this moment of ecstasy Irene felt that he was seeking comfort from his anxiety as well as expressing his love. She thought about this long after he had gone. In fact she fell asleep worrying about it.

CHAPTER SIX

NEXT morning began in a very routine way at the hospital. Jim Davis came in to talk with Sara for a few minutes. But Irene had no time to take any interest in their conversation. Dr. Sturgeon made his appearance and administered the girl the usual tranquilizer.

He stopped to say a few words to Irene, a smile on his cherubic face. "We should have you assisting in the O.R. today," he said. "We've got the entire morning filled."

"I'm busy enough here," she told him.

He shook his head. "It isn't the same since Barry Mann left. He really made things hum around here. What this hospital needs is more film stars!"

A little while later the orderlies came and wheeled Sara Davis off on a stretcher. Irene stood and glanced at her as they took her by the desk. The thin, dark girl was pale and her eyes were closed. The tranquilizer was already having its effect. Her husband came trailing after the stretcher-bearers and now he stopped and threw a questioning look at Irene.

"That stuff they gave her sure made her queer," he said uneasily.

Irene smiled at the shifty-eyed young folk singer. "They have to give a strong dosage. Her type of operation is done with just the tranquilizer and a local anaesthesia."

The dark man's cheek twitched. "You don't think anything will happen?"

She shook her head. "It's a minor operation."

He turned away with a deep sigh. "I don't like these joints. They give me the creeps." Then he glanced at her again. "How long will they keep her in there?"

"I couldn't tell you exactly," she said. "I'll make a guess at half an hour."

"It'll be the worst half-hour I'll ever know," Jim Davis said.

"Now don't be childish," Irene remonstrated with him. "The best thing you can do is sit down somewhere with a magazine. Let me show you." And she took him by the arm and led him to the small lounge reserved for visitors and handed him a popular picture weekly. "Just try and relax."

He accepted the magazine but stood glaring at her. "How can I relax when I don't know what's happening to her in there?"

Irene was startled at his intensity. Even though she'd recognized him as a neurotic she'd hadn't expected this kind of trouble. His attitude towards his wife had been so casual up until now that this came as a surprise. And she began to remember Ralph's doubts about the couple and wonder if they weren't well-founded. That there was something

about themselves they hadn't revealed.

"Your wife is in good, competent hands," she said in an easy voice, determined to somehow pacify the troubled young man. "And I'm sure you both wanted her to have this operation very badly otherwise you wouldn't have come here. So you must be prepared for the normal worries anyone expects to have in these circumstances."

Jim Davis gave her a look of impatient disgust. "That double talk don't help me any," he said and slumped into a chair with the magazine on his lap making no attempt to read it as he stared ahead of him with disconsolate eyes.

At least it gave Irene a chance to get away from him and often people gave a better account of themselves when they were left alone. She went back to her station at the desk and found the attention lights on from two of her other patients' rooms.

She had just finished looking after them when she had the first intimation that something was wrong. The orderlies came back with the burn patient who had been scheduled for further skin grafting immediately after the operation on Sara Davies.

Irene stood up and gave the first orderly a questioning glance. "What's wrong?" Her first thought was that Dr. Lederer might have had some sort of seizure. The old man had looked very tired to her lately.

The orderly shrugged. "I don't know exactly. Dr. Grant told us to bring the patient back. They're not doing any more operating this morning."

No sooner had they moved on with the stretcher than Ralph made his appearance in the corridor. She was shocked at the way he looked. His eyes had a glazed expression and his face seemed suddenly old with deep lines showing at his forehead and around his mouth. He came slowly towards her with a measured, mechanical walk as if he were forcing each step.

She went out to meet him. "What's happened?" she asked anxiously.

He ignored the question and didn't even look at her. Instead he said, "Where's Davis?"

"In the lounge."

He moved on to the lounge and Irene followed hesitantly a few steps behind

him. Jim Davis was still sprawled in the chair and when he saw Ralph coming toward him, still wearing the white smock he'd had on under his operating gown, he got to his feet with an expression of panic crossing his face.

"What is it?" the young folk singer demanded. "What's wrong? What have you done with her?" His voice rose to a frenzied pitch.

Ralph took him by the arms and stared at him with an oddly stern expression. When he spoke his voice was low and tense. "Did you know?" he asked. "Tell me! Did you know?"

The wiry young man tried to shake himself free. Now he was crying. "I don't know what you're talking about. What's happened to Sara?"

Irene was at his side now ready to help in any way she could. She glanced at Ralph and could see by his tormented expression what he was going to tell the distraught young husband.

Ralph murmured the words. "Your wife is dead. I'm sorry."

"No! No!" Jim Davis' grief became uncontrollable as he sank into the chair again and burying his face in his hands began to sob wildly.

"Take care of him, Irene," Ralph said. "I have to go back there." And he left them.

With the help of another nurse Irene managed to get the broken Jim Davis to take some heavy sedation. He still sat in the chair sobbing while she stood by.

"The doctor feels as badly as you do," Irene told him. "Surely you must have noticed that just now. I don't know what could have happened. But you can be sure he did all that he could."

The young folk singer looked up at her, his face distorted with his grief and anger. "He killed her and I'll see that he pays for it!"

"I know how you feel," she said soothingly. "But try and understand."

Jim Davis gulped back his tears. "He said it was a minor operation. That there was no risk! Now she's gone!" And he lost control of his emotions once again and resumed his sobbing.

After a while the sedation made him sleepy and she led him half-stumbling to a vacant room. She saw him safely stretched out on the bed and after putting a blanket over him and pulling

down the shade she slipped away quietly.

Outside and free of the problem of coping with the hysterical young husband for the first time since the news of Sara Davis' death on the operating table had reached her she found her mind whirling with confused thoughts. What had happened? Why had Ralph reacted in such a strange way? How could Sara have died as the result of a minor surgical procedure?

Then she saw the anaesthetist, Dr. Frank Sturgeon, standing by the desk talking to the nurse who was temporarily assisting her in this crisis. The bald, cherubic-faced doctor was looking completely unlike his regular self. His face was pale and the picture of despair.

As Irene came up to him he looked at her with troubled eyes. "What a dreadful thing to happen, Miss Hall."

She said, "Just what did happen? I've had no details."

He shook his head. "I suppose in a way I'm responsible. But I had no idea!" He sighed. "She died within a few minutes after I administered the anaesthetic. Ralph didn't even have a chance to begin the operation."

Irene stared at him. "Then it must have been her heart?"

"No." The bald man licked his lips nervously. "Her heart was perfectly normal up to that moment. It was the anaesthetic. She must have had a strong allergy to the local anaesthesia. If I had only known we could have avoided the danger. It all happened too quickly to do anything."

Irene knew at once what he was talking about. In one case in ten thousand there was always the danger of allergic reaction, even death, from some simple drug. Some people merely took an aspirin and died from the effects. But usually allergy victims had some hint of their condition. She said, "Didn't she and her husband know? They should have warned us!"

Dr. Sturgeon nodded sadly. "Ralph is sure they did know. But they were so anxious to have him do the operation they didn't tell him. Afraid he might refuse."

Irene had a sudden thought. "Ralph talked with his uncle about the case. Dr. Cabell Grant had seen the girl and discussed the operation with her. Why

do you suppose he didn't go ahead with it?"

The anaesthetist showed interest. "Could it have been that they told him about her allergies and he hesitated in operating?"

"I'm sure they must have," Irene continued with growing excitement. "Then they read about the Barry Mann operation and decided to try here."

"And of course they would be sure not to mention the girl's allergic condition," Sturgeon filled in.

"They'd be afraid that Ralph and Dr. Lederer would hold back with the operation as well," she said. "So they deliberately risked her life to get it done at once."

The bald surgeon sighed. "This could all be assumption, of course."

"I don't think so," Irene shook her head. "Ralph felt they were holding something back from the beginning. And I feel sure this was it."

"If that's the case," Sturgeon said, "the husband is directly responsible for what happened."

Irene met his eyes with a meaning glance. "And anyone else who knew about her condition," she said softly.

Sturgeon raised his eyebrows as the impact of her statement came to him fully. He said, "Dr. Cabell Grant?"

"Of course," she said. "He must have known. And when Ralph called him on long distance he deliberately withheld the information."

"Why would he do such an awful thing?" the anaesthetist asked.

"Because for some strange reason he's turned against Ralph," she said. "For some time now he's done everything possible to destroy him professionally. And I think this is part of it."

The expression on the chubby doctor's face was grim. "That's a very serious accusation, Miss Hall, but I'm inclined to agree there could be something in it. I'm going to have a conference with Dr. Lederer and Ralph now and I'll mention this to them."

After he'd gone Irene went about her regular work. But she had a difficult time keeping her mind on even the most simple tasks. The other nurse fortunately stayed to assist her and this took away some of the strain. Once, after changing a dressing for one of the children, she

stopped by the room in which she'd put Jim Davis and saw that he was still sleeping.

Now she could understand his bad state of nerves as he'd waited. He must have known his wife was in grave danger. It was too bad that he'd been so desperate and so ignorant of medical facts that he'd needlessly sacrificed her life. There might have been some delay until Dr. Sturgeon had decided on a safe anaesthesia for Sara Davis. But it would only have been a short one and her life would not have been lost.

If Dr. Cabell Grant had known her condition and refused the operation for her he was in a large measure responsible for her death. He had deliberately neglected to mention the all important fact of her allergy to Ralph. His purpose in doing so could only have been malicious. If he had done it to put his nephew in a bad position he had certainly succeeded. She wondered if he cared that he had sacrificed a life to win this shallow victory.

Naturally Ralph felt responsible and would take it badly. There was no telling how deep the hurt could be. But Jim Davis could spare him much of the pain if he would admit that he knew of his wife's condition and held back the information. But was the shifty young man willing to admit such a thing? She doubted it. It would be much more in character if the folk singer tried to blame Ralph for his wife's death. It was a dreadful situation and the entire hospital reflected the shock and tragedy of the unfortunate girl's death. A hush seemed to have fallen over all the activities at Stockton Memorial.

The phone rang and it was Dr. Lederer. "We'd like you to come to the office for a few minutes, Miss Hall," he said brusquely.

Irene left the other nurse in charge and hurried down the corridor towards the old plastic surgeon's office. It had only been twenty-four hours ago that she'd first met Jim Davis and his wife there for the first time. She'd not dreamed that their coming would spell tragedy for them all.

When she knocked on the office door Dr. Frank Sturgeon opened it and let her in. Dr. Lederer was sitting behind his desk and Ralph leaned against the window sill. He nodded to Irene as she came in.

Dr. Lederer waved her to a chair opposite him. "We've heard about your

theories from Dr. Sturgeon," he said. "In many ways they are the same as our own. Have you talked to the young man since Dr. Grant left him?"

"No," Irene said. "I gave him a strong sedative. He's still asleep."

The old surgeon nodded. "Well, that was the wise thing to do." He looked at Ralph. "I'll talk to him myself when he wakes up and see what I can find out."

"He's going to be difficult to handle," Ralph warned him.

"I expect that." The gaunt face of the old man showed resignation. It occurred to Irene that the stimulation of the tragedy had put Dr. Lederer on his mettle. He seemed to have new vigour and strength to meet the problem.

"I think we may take it for granted," he said in a firm voice, "that this young man was fully aware of the danger his wife was facing. And I believe that Dr. Cabell Grant also knew she had a dangerous allergy to local anaesthesia. The question I am asking myself is why he didn't tell you when you called, Ralph."

Ralph Grant shrugged. "He was cold, brief and gave me no information."

"I see." Dr. Lederer leaned back in his chair and gave Ralph a searching look. "I accepted you as a member of this clinic without question. I took you on my own valuation of your character and ability. Under normal circumstances that is how it would remain. But we have come up against a problem that is not normal. I'm afraid that now I'm reluctantly going to have to do some probing."

Involuntarily Irene turned to Ralph to see how he would accept the old doctor's declaration. She saw that his face had crimsoned and he stood up from the window sill and took a step forward towards the senior surgeon's desk.

"I've appreciated your trust and confidence," he said quietly. "But I'm not sure I can go along with this questioning. Perhaps, considering what has happened, I'd better simplify things by resigning."

Irene was so frightened for him that she almost shouted out a protest against this suggestion of his. If Ralph resigned now it would surely end his career. Outsiders would interpret it as a gesture of guilt on his part and this, along with the shadow his uncle had put him in at Manhattan General, would make it

almost impossible for him to find any position of trust.

Chubby Dr. Sturgeon looked up from his chair dejectedly. "I would say that I was the one to resign. The neglect, if there was any, certainly lies at my door."

Dr. Lederer's gaunt old face looked more eagle-like than ever as he studied the two men. "We'll think about resignations later," he said. "Just now I'm interested in finding out something. And I mean to do it." He fastened his stern glance on Ralph again. "When I took you in here I made you part of my team. I gambled my own reputation on my belief in you. A scandal hangs over us like a cloud now. And I demand to know all the facts needed to make our position clear to the public."

"I'll do anything I can, sir," Ralph said, almost primly. "But I'm not certain that questions about my past will help us with the present problem."

There was a moment of silence. The old man leaned forward with his hands clasped on his desk in a familiar gesture. His voice was weary when he spoke. "We talk about problems," he said. "There is only one problem. An ignorant, frightened girl died on our operating table today. That's the human fact, gentlemen. We lost an unhappy girl's life. Let's not lose sight of this with a lot of cold unrelated words like problems, situation and such. We saw a girl die!"

"I'm sorry," Ralph said with contriteness. "Believe me I wasn't forgetting that."

"I ask full co-operation of my associates in the operating room and out of it," the old surgeon continued, his keen eyes focused on Ralph. "Now I'm going to ask you to tell me the answer to a question I consider important to all this. What is the true explanation of the bad feelings between you and your uncle?"

Ralph hesitated and looked from one to the other of them and finally he rested his gaze on Dr. Lederer. "Do you really think it's pertinent to what's happened?"

"Yes," the old man said emphatically. "If Cabel Grant hates you enough to withhold information that sent a girl to her death I think I should know his reason!"

Ralph glanced at her and then with a small sigh said, "All right. I haven't told anyone. I felt it was a purely personal thing. That no one would benefit from it. My uncle hates me because I know something about him. Something that

he fears might get out and ruin him professionally."

"I see," the old man's keen eyes were bright under the shaggy brows. "So he attempted to discredit you first in case you should decide to talk?"

"That's about it," Ralph admitted. "He used the situation of the woman accusing me of making love to her to oust me from Manhattan General. Even though he knew she was psychotic and lying. The real reason had come about weeks before that. When I happened to make a closer than usual inspection of our medical and drug records. I found we had drawn far more drug supplies than we'd used. And it didn't take much detective work to trace the narcotics directly to my uncle. Over the years he has become a heavy user of drugs."

"In plain words he is addicted to narcotics?" Dr. Lederer said.

Ralph nodded. "I made a mistake in allowing him to know that I'd found it out. He made no attempt to deny it. But from that moment on he began to work against me. Like any other addict his mind is twisted. He sees me as a threat to his addiction and position. The direct method is to destroy me."

The moment of silence that followed Ralph's disclosure was broken by Dr. Frank Sturgeon saying, "We all know that addiction in the profession is not unknown. But the consequences in this case are so dreadful it's doubly shocking."

"An addict can't be depended on," Dr. Lederer said, "whether he's in or out of the profession. Unfortunately those of us who are doctors can become legally addicted since we have legal access to drugs. The law should be changed."

"If my uncle deliberately allowed me to bring Sara Davis to her death," Ralph said, "there's no point in my protecting him any further."

"It depends on if he knew," the senior surgeon considered. "And we all think that he did. The facts indicate he must have. Otherwise he'd have operated himself. But who will admit this? I doubt that he will. And I'm almost as sure we'll not be able to make the husband talk."

"Let me phone my uncle now and tell him what happened," Ralph said impulsively. "Let me face him with it and see what he says."

Irene watched the senior surgeon's face as he reacted to this. The old man

shook his head and spoke quietly. "No," he said. "I'll call him myself."

There was a slight delay before he got through to Dr. Cabell Grant at the Manhattan General Hospital. Irene and the others listened tensely as he talked to the plastic surgeon in New York. The outcome of the conversation was disappointing but not entirely unexpected.

Dr. Lederer raised his eyes to them as he talked on the phone as a signal for their attention. "I see," he said finally, "so you definitely did not know of the Davis girl having any allergic condition?"

The old man listened to the somewhat lengthy reply and then said, "I see. Thank you very much. I'm sorry to have bothered you." He put down the phone and looked at them all. "He denies everything. But he was much too nervous about it. I'm sure he's lying."

"Then our only hope of vindication is the husband," Dr. Sturgeon said.

"A slim hope," Ralph said bitterly. "That boy's as twisted as my uncle."

"I'm not so much interested in vindication as I am in pinning down guilt," Dr. Lederer announced quietly. "And I shall not rest until I do that." He glanced at the other two doctors. "I want you to reschedule the postponed operations for this afternoon. You take care of them and I'll look after this other business." Then to Irene he said, "I want you to call me as soon as Jim Davis wakes up and is able to talk. I have some things to say to that boy."

Irene waited for Ralph in the hallway. He came up to her still distressed and pale. "I guess a lot of our plans will have to be postponed if this isn't cleared up," he said.

"Don't talk that way," she said. "I know it will be all right."

"Nothing will bring back Sara Davis' life," he said, studying the floor with downcast eyes. "I don't think I'll ever get over it. I don't know how I'll face that operating room again this afternoon."

"That's why you must do it," she said. "Why Dr. Lederer asked you to do it. Take your cue from him, Ralph. He's a very wise old man and he doesn't blame you any more than he does himself or Dr. Sturgeon. Let him take care of this."

Ralph looked up at her. "But I knew in a way all along. I guessed they were holding back something. Naturally I didn't suspect anything like the truth. It's incredible that her husband allowed us to go ahead knowing what he did."

"He was almost out of his mind with fear," she said. "I was with him."

"No wonder. He knew the risk," Ralph said. "Of course he won't admit it now."

She squeezed his arm. "Try not to think about any of it. You have your work lined up for this afternoon. Give your best to those patients. There's nothing your regrets can do to help Sara Davis now."

Irene went back to the plastic surgery floor and found that Jim Davis had not come out of his room yet. She waited another hour and then went down to see how he was. She found him sitting on the bed with a cigarette in his mouth.

He looked up at her sullenly. "What do you want?"

"To see how you are," she said. "And Dr. Lederer wants to speak with you."

The young man stared at the floor. "I don't want to talk to him."

"I think you should," she advised. And at the same time she picked up the room phone and put a call through to Dr. Lederer's office. She saw that Jim Davis had changed his attitude. His grief had been replaced with sullen defiance.

A few minutes later the senior surgeon limped into the room and drawing up a chair sat down opposite the young folk singer. He said, "I know what a terrible blow and shock this has been. But there are certain things we should settle now."

The dark young man gave him a bitter glance. "Yeah?"

"Such as where you would like your wife's body sent," Dr. Lederer said. "I understand you are from the West Coast. Her parents would likely prefer that the body go back home."

Jim Davis' face twisted in a sour smile. "Her folks are no good! They been divorced for years. They wouldn't want to be bothered."

"I see," Dr. Lederer sighed. "Well, I suppose you will decide on the arrangements. You were living in New York?"

"We had a room there that's all," the young man said. "I can't take her back there. I got nothing except the old station wagon."

"There's no need to worry," the senior surgeon said. "I'll look after all the arrangements. There's a nice funeral home here and a rather pretty cemetery. I think Sara might be as happy here in Stockton as anywhere else."

The folk singer gave him a sneering look. "What difference does it make

where she is? You killed her! That's the important thing!"

"If you think that I and the other attending doctors don't sincerely share your sorrow for your wife," the old man said gravely, "you're very wrong."

"Don't think you're getting away with it," the folk singer said belligerently. "Maybe she was a charity case but we got rights. I'm seeing a lawyer. Just paying her funeral expenses won't satisfy me."

Dr. Lederer looked at the young man with sad eyes. "No," he agreed, "I don't suppose so. I'm very sorry for you, young man. You have had a great loss and I think you also bear the burden of knowing that you might have prevented your wife's death had you been honest enough to tell us of her allergic condition."

Jim Davis jumped up in a rage. "Don't tell me I'm to blame! You're the ones!" He shouted. "All of you! You people killed her!" And he ran out of the room and down the corridor.

Irene gave Dr. Lederer a questioning glance. The old man shook his head in reply. "No use trying to stop him now. The more his own conscience bothers him the more he'll blame us. This is something we've got to let time handle."

The next few days were grim ones. Sara Davis was buried on a dull Fall afternoon. At her graveside were the three doctors, Irene and Ellen Wentworth. Across from them on the other side of the grave Jim Davis stood alone and unrelenting in his hate. After the hospital chaplain finished the simple service and the body was lowered into the earth Dr. Lederer limped across to say a few words of comfort to the lonely young man. But the folk singer gave him a look of silent loathing and strode off towards the old station wagon. In a moment he was in it and breaking the quiet of the cemetery with the roar of its ailing motor as he drove away at a crazy speed.

The old man watched him go forlornly and then shrugged and turned back to the others. "I'm afraid young Davis is headed for serious trouble," he said.

Irene felt the same way. And what worried her particularly was that she was almost certain the trouble would involve them all. Jim Davis would not rest until he'd taken some sort of revenge on the people he blamed for his young wife's death. Or pretended to blame. For she was certain he'd known the truth about Sara's condition and hid it from

them. So he was the most guilty of all. Unless you consider Dr. Cabell Grant. Certainly no one was more to blame for what had happened than the plastic surgeon at Manhattan General. But how to prove it?

Meanwhile it seemed that each day Ralph grew more listless and ill-looking. Irene was afraid he might have a mental or physical breakdown because of the death of Sara Davis. To add to the general tension Jim Davis was still staying around Stockton. He'd been doing some entertaining in a coffee house on the edge of the town that catered to the teen-age crowd. In return he'd been given a small salary and a room on the premises. Reports that came back to the hospital confirmed that he was a reasonably competent folk singer and popular with the youngsters.

Then one day a local lawyer called Dr. Lederer and told him Davis had consulted him with a view to starting a suit against the hospital. The old surgeon relayed the information to Irene, saying, "It could be nasty if he finds a lawyer unscrupulous enough to take on the case. And one is bound to turn up."

Irene looked at him with worried eyes. "Have you told Ralph?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. Maybe I'd better not. He's filled with this thing enough as it is."

"That's too true," she said. "If only we could do something to help him. But there doesn't seem any way."

Irene was certain this was true. And then miraculously there was a turn of events that changed everything. It began when the film star, Barry Mann, returned to the hospital for a check on his face-lifting operation. This time he came alone except for a female secretary who was tolerant enough to let Irene bring him his steaks openly.

The film star stared at Irene with puzzled eyes as she put his tray down in front of him. "You look pale," he said. "What's the matter? Don't tell me you've been unlucky in love. That's happened to me a half-dozen times."

She managed a small laugh and then she went on to tell him the whole story. Barry Mann listened with a concentration that was quite unusual, his handsome new face slightly frowned.

"And you really think this kid knew all along about his wife?" he asked after she'd finished.

"Yes. But he'll never tell the truth about it."

Barry Mann shook his head sadly. "I know his type. Crazy, stage struck youngsters who'll do anything and risk anything for the big break."

Irene sighed. "That seems to sum up the story."

The film star stared at the big steak on his plate. "I'm sorry you told me. Now I won't really enjoy this."

"I didn't mean to concern you with my troubles," Irene said sincerely.

"I'd have been disappointed if you hadn't," Barry Mann told her. "I make it a habit to share my friends' troubles. And you're one of my best friends."

It was a flattering compliment but Irene didn't think too much about it. Then two days later after Barry Mann had checked out of the hospital he phoned her.

"I'm at the Stockton Hotel," he said. "I'll be here overnight. Have a suite on the fourth floor. I want you to do me a special favour. Be here tonight at eight o'clock and bring along both Dr. Lederer and Dr. Grant. Don't take no for an answer."

It was a strange request and Irene had a hard time getting Ralph and Dr. Lederer to take it seriously. The senior surgeon looked disgruntled. "I'm not interested in his cocktail parties," he said. "I prefer to spend my evenings with Rufus."

Irene laughed. "Maybe he'll let you bring your dog along."

"Wouldn't come," Dr. Lederer smiled through his grouchiness, "he doesn't like the Hollywood crowd."

Ralph also put in a protest. "I really don't feel up to any social affairs these days."

"Just the same I want you to come," Irene said. "I promised you both would."

At eight o'clock they presented themselves at the fourth floor suite of Barry Mann. Dr. Lederer in his best black suit that was a little green with age and Ralph in a casual charcoal that brought out his present drawn look in a manner that touched Irene's heart. She wore a simple blue cocktail dress on the theory that it would suit any occasion.

When Barry Mann opened the door to them Irene saw that he was dressed in a casual grey street suit. And he seemed alone in his room. So it was not to be a party occasion. He glanced at his watch and said, "Glad you got here, folks. I was afraid you'd be late and that would have spoiled things." He went across the room and opened the bedroom door.

"If you don't mind I'd like you to wait in there. I'm expecting another visitor whom I don't want to see you."

They filed into the bedroom and with amused glances at each other found seats on the bed and chairs. A few minutes later there was a knock at the door of the suite and Barry Mann opened it to a visitor they could not see because the bedroom door was only open a crack.

But when he spoke they recognized the voice of Jim Davis. He said, "I've been thinking over what you said, Mr. Mann. And I want to take your offer."

"Good," Barry Mann said. "I'll give you a card to my agent and he'll see that you get the job. Have you written out the statement I wanted?"

There was a pause. "Yeah, I got it with me," Jim Davis said reluctantly. "You're sure I can't get in any trouble?"

"I'd say you've had trouble enough as it is," the star said.

"You mean losin' Sara that way." The folk singer's voice had a tremor in it. "Honest, Mr. Mann, there's nights I can hardly get to sleep I'm so lonely and I blame myself for what I did."

"Then you can see why I want this statement," Barry Mann said. "My friends don't deserve to carry that guilt as well."

"It was that first old guy in New York that got me mixed up. He went on when I mentioned about Sara nearly dying out on the coast when she had a tooth extracted." Jim Davis was indignant. "He hedged about doing the operation and I knew he wouldn't in the end. So we decided to try up here where they wouldn't know and not say anything."

"Well, it's all over now," Barry Mann said not unkindly. "And Sara was in agreement with you. There was nothing to stop her, telling the doctors herself. So it was her wish in a way. Don't brood on it. And try and make good for her sake."

They talked for a few minutes more and then the film star let him go. A moment after he'd closed the door on the young folk singer he entered the bedroom with a smile and handed Irene the written statement Jim Davis had given him.

"I hope that straightens some things out," he said.

Irene read it quickly and then passed it on to Dr. Lederer and Ralph to read together. She looked up at the film star. "How can we ever pay you for this?"

"The account is squared already," he winked. "In steaks!"

Dr. Lederer looked up from the statement. "This settles the blame where it should be. On Dr. Cabell Grant's shoulders." He turned to Ralph. "I take it you're in agreement this should be turned over to the New York Medical Association?"

Ralph nodded. "It might as well be now. Before he does any more harm to himself or anyone else."

The film star invited them all to join him for some refreshment in the restaurant downstairs. Surprisingly Dr. Lederer agreed to accept the invitation. He winked at Irene. "Might as well catch up on my night life," he said. "After all I don't have anyone to be alone with except Rufus, and it's past his bedtime already."

They said goodnight to the two men at the entrance to the hotel restaurant and went on out to Ralph's car. They

sat there for a moment in the darkness before he turned on the motor.

Irene gave a deep sigh. "At least now we know."

Ralph looked ahead into the night, the outline of his serious face barely visible in the shadowed interior of the car. "Yes, now we know," he agreed. "Too bad it won't bring Sara back."

She felt her eyes moisten. "I know," she agreed. "I feel the same way. But she let it happen because she loved her husband very much and wanted to help him in the only way she knew how. So perhaps we shouldn't feel so badly."

He turned to her and circled her with his arm. "Perhaps not," he said gently. And there was a new note of understanding in his tone that gave her hope for them. "Women in love are a mad, courageous and loyal lot. You've shown me that!" And he pressed his lips to hers.



THE END

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